Department of Sociology

SOCIAL MEANINGS OF MENSTRUATION:

A FEMINIST INVESTIGATION

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SUMMARY
SOCIAL MEANINGS OF MENSTRUATION: A FEMINIST APPROACH

This thesis constitutes a preliminary investigation of the ways in which the British dominant culture deals with the phenomenon of menstruation. Its theoretical framework is a social constructionist radical feminism: an analysis of male political power which regards such domination as socially rather than biologically created. One crucial concern has been to challenge the determinism behind most existing theories about attitudes towards menstruation.

In an attempt to 'triangulate' this study, data has been drawn from a number of sources: interviews with individual men; gynaecology textbooks; 'the literature', including data from research on women; and the experiences of the campaign to ban tax on sanitary wear.

This research focuses particularly upon men's attitudes, since men have greater social power than women. Men's and women's views of menstruation are not only expressed in different language, but contain quite different elements, and are concerned with different issues. There exists a 'male culture', within men-only groupings where menstruation is viewed as a "sick joke", and where it is understood in a strongly sexual way.

It is argued that 'taboo' is not an appropriate way of describing the social marking of menstruation in this culture: 'etiquette' is proposed as an alternative term. It describes rules of behaviour which reinforce women's and men's different social statuses, without implying that such rules involve any supernatural sanction.

The patriarchal attitudes of gynaecologists are clearly shown in their textbooks, as they struggle for the right to define the 'normal woman'. Menstrual pain is a crucial case where female and male definitions clash: both individual men and gynaecologists display a systematic failure of empathy towards women.

The development of ideas about 'premenstrual tension' (menstrual cycle mood change interpreted as an illness) and the campaign against tax on sanitary wear are contrasting cases where attempts have been made to bring issues relating to menstruation into the public eye.

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DECLARATION

Parts of the material used in this thesis have been published in a somewhat different form in an article, "Male power and menstrual etiquette", in (ed) Hilary Homans, The Sexual Politics of Reproduction.(Gower 1985).
Related material, which may overlap with parts of this thesis in small ways, has been published in "The Sexual Politics of Premenstrual Tension", Women's Studies International Forum, Vol.6, No.1, 1983, and in "Who needs PMT?" in Seeing Red, published with Valerie Hey and Andrea Eagan, which I also edited, (Hutchinson/Explorations in Feminism, Oct 1985).

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"The novelist is sitting on the shores of the lake, holding the little line of reason in her hands when suddenly there is a violent jerk; she feels the line race through her fingers.

The imagination has rushed away; it has taken to the depths; it has sunk - heaven knows where - into what dark pool of extraordinary experience. The reason has to cry 'Stop!' The novelist has to pull on the line and haul the imagination to the surface. The imagination comes to the top in a state of fury.

Good heavens she cries - how dare you interfere with me! How dare you pull me out with your wretched fishing line. And I - that is the reason - have to reply, 'My dear you were going altogether too far. Men would be shocked.' Calm yourself, I say, as she sits panting on the bank - panting with rage and disappointment. We have only got to wait fifty years or so. In fifty years I shall be able to use all this very queer knowledge that you are ready to bring me. But not now. You see, I go on, trying to calm her, I cannot make use of what you tell me - about women's bodies for instance - their passions - and so on, because the conventions are still very strong. If I were to overcome the conventions I should need the courage of a

hero, and I am not a hero...

Very well says the imagination, dressing herself up again in her petticoat and skirts, we will wait. We will wait another fifty years. But it seems to me a pity.

This then is another incident, and quite a common incident in the career of a woman novelist. She has to say I will wait. I will wait until men have become so civilised that they are not shocked when a woman speaks the truth about her body. The future of fiction depends very much upon to what extent men can be educated to stand free speech in women."

pp xxxviii-xl, Virginia Woolf, <u>The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of "The Years"</u>.

Fifty years from the day in 1931 when Virginia Woolf delivered that speech to the London Society for Women's Service, an organisation of young professional women, I was writing applications to the sociology departments of universities to be allowed to study the social meaning of menstruation. Again there exists a mass movement of women who want to be allowed to speak the truth about our bodies. Still men are shocked.

I can try to speak the truth about menstruation - but I fear that I cannot. I do not know the truth. We are not

allowed to discover the truth. In the hall of mirrors where men are enlarged and women are diminished, men's views overwhelm women's views, even concerning our own bodies.

Virginia Woolf hoped that if women waited long enough (and fifty years is a long time in this century of change) men would become 'civilised' enough to stand free speech in women. It is true that I was accepted by the university to study menstruation. It has become possible for women to consider what might be true about our bodies - but at a price. My next door neighbour covers his ears when he is told the subject of my study: "I didn't hear that". I have to practice not blushing when I tell people what I am doing. The register of British Medical Sociology attempts to exclude my research. My male fellow graduate students stay away from seminars I give.

Men are still shocked. In an age which tolerates a high-street trade in moving pictures of women being sexually tortured, young middle-class men report being shocked on seeing tampons in the bathrooms of houses women live in.

It seems to me that menstruation is a harmless little function - absurd in its unimportance. Like various other bodily events, it is a minor inconvenience to those in whom it occurs. For some, it brings with it pain and other problems, as do many other physical events. What makes it worth studying, bearing these embarrassments, is precisely

that, in even this small, inoffensive thing, women may not speak the truth. The truth might not even be so alarming, or indeed at all interesting - but we may not speak it.

Each small abuse, each shaming experience, wears away a little more of a woman's self-confidence. It is particularly debilitating and undermining to feel that one's own body is held to be the core of one's inferiority.

Most existing writing on menstruation analyses men's attitudes as 'natural' reaction to the unspeakable physical facts. It is 'understanding' of men's feelings to the point of justifying their behaviour. I have tried to examine the detail of men's reactions to menstruation, to take them apart to see how they work.

I see my work as an attempt to lay out before us, myself and other women, exactly what the forces are which prevent us from letting our minds, our imaginations, free. I dive and collect samples, so that we can examine their substance, consider how they might have got there. Whether this process can in fact help us to change things, or to avoid damaging collisions, remains to be seen. This work is part of a political process and cannot be complete in itself, as an individual effort.

The object of my study is to contribute to the feminist project of understanding how the domination of women by men operates: I have taken menstruation as an example, for the

body has always seemed to me a vital area of concern. I could not make sense of my personal experience of menstruation, and was unwilling to accept the explanations on offer.

Although it was certainly partly the obscurity surrounding menstruation which attracted my interest, the lack of literature from which to work has been a major problem. Most of what exists is outside the discipline of sociology, and operates within modes of thought which are uncongenial to the sociologist. Even the very little which purports to be sociology works so much in stereotypes as to defeat its own purposes (eg Skultans 1970).

One might expect to find help within the field of medical sociology, but in fact I found that there, too, authors generally work with a model of 'the body' and bodily functions which entirely ignores women's experience. For instance the recent reader, Social Aspects of the Human Body entirely marginalises gender as an issue (Polhemus 1978). Reading with a concern for menstruation reveals many thoroughgoing androcentric assumptions about the meanings of health and illness (eg Robinson 1971; Zola 1966). Even books on euphemism do not mention menstruation! (eg Sagarin 1968)

I have found the dominant academic discourse on menstruation to be what I shall call the 'myth and mystery' approach. This sees attitudes to menstruation as super-

stitions from the past, 'surviving' particularly among the poor and less-educated, and among those people referred to in such writings earlier this century as 'savages', who are now delicately spoken of as 'other cultures', but who are still contemplated with the same underlying ignorance and blindness. Snow and Johnson's (1977) study population is typical - described as "multi-ethnic, low-income" women. While such research may produce interesting findings, there is a taken-for-granted correct attitude to menstruation standing in contrast to the "folklore" which is seen as problematic.

The more subtle, or the more feminist, acknowledge, like Toth, Delaney and Lupton (1978) that we are "not so enlightened or free from myths as we should be", but that set of assumptions about the March of Progress bringing rationality to every area of life is still there.

In reaction to the myth and mystery line of thinking, with its characteristic sweeping generalisations across different cultures and centuries of human history, I have strictly limited the range of the empirical work I have done. My interviews with men are confined to a white, non-Jewish, relatively well-educated, relatively young group.

I have not attempted to 'cover' the variety of different understandings of menstruation which exist within this society. I believe that a very great range of different factors come into play in creating these understandings,

and that differences would be found between one school playground and another, let alone the massive differences which certainly exist between people of one cultural or religious tradition and another, of different age groups, of different social classes. Detailed mapping of these variations - differences and similarities - would be another project: I needed a data-set of manageable size.

Above all, I have wanted to turn the spotlight back onto the powerful, onto those who usually stand behind it, onto those who usually ask the questions.

CHAPTER 2

FEMINIST THEORY AND THE SOCIAL MEANINGS OF MENSTRUATION

In this chapter I shall explore the ways in which I see my research into menstruation as relating to wider questions of theory. There is no one particular theoretical question which my work is designed to address, nor is there a single consistent body of theoretical work which I have set out to criticise or develop. But my work has been very much about theory, nonetheless - or rather I have found that questions of theory, evidence, method and, especially, epistemology, have been tightly bound up together throughout the work.

I would argue that all theories related to social meanings of menstruation are political by nature, in a gender-divided society. Because menstruation is experienced only by women, women and men of necessity understand it in different ways. This difference is vastly compounded and complicated by a social system which sets the category men in power over the category women, and which uses notions about 'nature' to justify this power.

Traditional theories about menstruation (and about women's bodies generally) are sexist in the sense that they take for granted women's inferiority to men, and they understand everything in that light - crucially, they deny and exclude women's own perspective. The problems some women have with

menstruation, for instance, may be interpreted as a sign that women are simply badly designed (worse designed than men, that is); or that women are inherently sinful and being continually punished by a male god; or that evolution or some other abstract force intended women to be constantly breeding and that 'civilized' women's failure to do so naturally brings pain and suffering. Such sexist 'explanations' are banal and circular: they blend the biological together with the social into a smooth mixture of commonsensical ideas which ultimately explain nothing. Such ideas constitute data for my study of male-supremacist ideologies.

The theories I shall discuss in detail are those which come in some way within the feminist project - either they describe themselves as feminist or they have been read as feminist. As will become clear, this means in practice looking at a remarkably broad variety of theoretical approaches.

Although the material I will be looking at relates specifically to the issue of gender, the problems which arise from it are of great relevance to what is called mainstream sociology. A crucial problem, indeed perhaps <u>the</u> crucial problem of social theory, is that of the relation between an individual person's lived experience and what we call social structure. Within feminism, this problem is confronted at every point in our attempt to reinterpret gender relations: it arises both in terms of

the relation of men's lived experience to patriarchal ideas and practices and in terms of how women's experience relates to women's objective oppression.

As will become clear, I place myself somewhere between the poles of ethnomethodology and economistic marxism in my view of social life. I very much appreciate the insight of the phenomenological sociologies into the construction of everyday life, and the ways in which individuals in interaction invent their own worlds. However such focus on individuals tends to obscure the influence of social structure, of kinds of power which are not negotiable.

On the other hand while positivistic, materialist philosophies can account for certain very important social phenomena, they do tend to make invisible people's power to construct their own reality. They tend not to be particularly helpful in describing the ways in which systems of oppression are expressed and maintained in social life. I believe that people actively construct their own social worlds, but within structured constraints. Male power is material, but it is also very evident as power over ideas and definitions. My particular purpose is to develop a theoretical perspective on women's oppression which I call, for lack of a more elegant term, social-constructionist radical feminism.

At this point I have nothing new to add at the theoretical level to the vast number of words that have been written

around these issues in the discipline. I hope it will be evident, though, that I have raised and developed these problems throughout my work in specific relation to feminism and to the social meanings of menstruation. The specific set of substantive questions I have to address about the relation between human biological existence and human society are also vital issues in other fields of study than that of gender relations, most obviously to the sociology of health and illness.

Why study menstruation?

I chose menstruation as a focus through which to explore a wide range of issues within feminist theory. The radical feminist impulse is to seek out what women have in common. More and more, though, when we look at a subject in detail, we find new differences between women emerging - differences previously hidden by ideologies which make some women's experience more visible than others, and which may also distort all women's experiences beyond recognition. In exploring issues around women and our biology, many feminists have focused upon pregnancy and childbirth as exemplary or even definitional female experiences. But while the ideology insists that all women should become mothers, in the real world all women do not, and even among those who do, the significance of the experience may vary greatly between individuals.

Like pregnancy and childbirth, menstruation is not a universal experience. Some women never menstruate because they are born with unusual or incomplete reproductive organs. Others, affected perhaps by environmental factors, disease, medical interventions or malnutrition, menstruate rarely or irregularly, or stop having periods early in life. Some women spend most of their adult lives either pregnant or lactating.

But the largest group of non-menstruating women is made up of women who have passed the menopause. A women who lives out her three score years and ten will probably menstruate for only half of that lifetime. Menstruation as such is not positively valued. However, as long as the ability to bear children is held to be the 'purpose' of womankind, women who do not menstruate will be regarded as not fully female. This view is obviously oppressive to older women, but also indirectly to all women, for it is an essential part of the thought process which justifies keeping women in subordinate positions with the idea that this (compulsory) childbearing is 'naturally' limiting.

Research on the menopause and ageing has been developing in the time I have been doing my research (eg Reitz 1979; WHO 1981 Voda et al 1982) and perhaps in the future insights from the study of both these experiences can be fully integrated.

By choosing to study menstruation, then, I have been limited

to examining the experience of some women for some years of their lives. However insofar as menstruation is understood by men as a marker of womanhood, men's attitudes towards it affect all women: they form part of their general definition of 'woman'.

Since menstruation is such a politically-charged area, various kinds of discourse around the subject have emerged in and around the women's liberation movement. Indeed, some of my earliest fieldnotes clearly illustrate the strength of what I came to see as the dominant mode of thinking about menstruation amongst feminist-influenced sociologists.

> "I am frequently offered research projects I could do on menstruation by other sociologists. Invariably they see women as the core of the problem, usually they want to show changes taking place in the recent past. Very often the focus is on sexual practice - I have lost count of the number of people who have told me that many men and women do now have sex during the woman's periods.
>
> The basic idea seems to be that I should be focusing on describing women's consciousness about menstruation, preferably showing systematic differences between groups of women with regard to this consciousness.
>
> I want to start with a list of things I am <u>not</u> trying to say:
>
> - I do not think that menstruation is necessarily important to women.

- I do not think that women should celebrate menstruation, unless it makes them happy to do so.
- I do not think that women should even be interested in menstruation.
- I do not think that menstruation expresses our womanhood or our femininity or the dark side of our natures or any other cosmic truth.
- I do not think that what we need is more sex education in schools.
- Or more 'openness about these things'.
- I do not think that women's power resides in their reproductive organs.
- Or in men's mystic fear of them..."

2.1 THEORETICAL PROBLEM AREAS

In the following pages I shall lay out four inter-related theoretical problem areas which I think must be addressed by any feminist discussion of menstruation. Then I will look in more detail at some of the underlying notions on which existing theories have been based.

When I began this research, I saw the crucial problem of feminist theory as that of determining the origins of women's oppression. I have gradually moved away from that preoccupation, influenced by Rosaldo (1980), Eichler (1980) and Delphy and Leonard (1983) towards the perception that all such theories are by nature unproveable, and

inevitably based on dubious evidence. The term 'origin' has been used to refer both to ultimate causes, in the sense of present-day logical finalities, and to the practice of seeking the sources of our present social structure in pre-history. Both these projects are endlessly interesting, but also simply endless, and therefore may distract us from more useful and achievable tasks within the study of women's condition here and now. Therefore I exclude the search for origins from my list of crucial problems, though of course it reappears in other guises.

The first of the problem areas I do think it fruitful to address is that of one's view of nature, specifically of how women's biology relates to women's social position. This debate is often summed up as an opposition between 'biological determinism' and 'social constructionism' (eg Sayers 1982), but I think this tends to caricature the participants in the argument. Although some ideas are clearly biological determinist, few feminists espouse these - they are truly the 'natural' preserve of anti-feminism. There are, however, enormous differences within the 'social constructionist' camp, for no one can deny that biology is in some sense real.

Actually the arguments are about how we can <u>know</u> anything about our biology, which aspects of this biology are socially significant and what are the processes which characterise the interaction between what we call the

biological and what we call the social. Often the issue is a matter of imagination, of asking how free we are to re-evaluate biological entities which our culture sees negatively? Denise Riley (1983) has recently reviewed this debate and has pointed out many of its problems. No one, however, can resolve these questions theoretically - I am inclined to think that they must be worked through primarily in relation to each of the issues of biology and society which emerge as important in social life.

I have tried to discuss these issues concretely, by reference to various aspects of the phenomenon of menstruation. In particular I have tried to be most specific about the problems which some women experience with menstruation, menstrual pain and 'premenstrual tension', the issues which arise from these experiences and how they are socially constructed. I have found myself raising new questions, about the nature of biological 'knowledge'; about the very special impact upon women of an ideology which utilises ideas about what is natural to justify their treatment. Is 'scientific knowledge' anything other than ideology? Should we abandon the idea that there is any purely biological category of phenomenon? How, then, can we learn anything new about our biology?

I have found determinism at some level within a great range of existing theories related to menstruation, and each of these will be challenged in its context. One specific line of thinking which is very widespread is that attitudes

towards menstruation derive originally from menstruation's place in reproduction. That is, that menstruation inherently represents a woman's potential fertility, or her non-pregnancy. This logic is so widespread and important to theories about menstruation that I have wanted to look at it in detail, and to draw evidence from my research to see how it bears on these theories. It is discussed at length in Chapter 7.

Secondly there is the problem of one's view of history - of whether, and how, women's situation vis a vis men has changed historically. If one rejects the idea that our biology determines our position, then this becomes most important, for we will then expect to be able to detect specific changes taking place in how women live and are seen over time.

I have been concerned to argue against attempts to assimilate men's attitudes and women's experiences across cultures and throughout time into a single stereotype. Menstruation is a particularly difficult area to investigate historically, for evidence about women's experience of it is extremely sparse. However, we can see considerable change taking place in social views of menstruation in the recent past, and I have tried to look at what effect these changes in the practicalities and the mores of society have had on women (see Chapters 8 and 12). Further I have looked at how medical ideas have developed in my analysis of gynaecology's ideological influence. And

I have discussed associated changes in how women's pain has been dealt with, relating this to the development of the modern medical profession and to ideas about women's sexuality (Chapter 10).

Looking at specific changes in the treatment of menstruation should help to develop a larger analysis of how women's situation has changed. One aspect of this is perhaps to see a general change in Western ideological views of women's position, from a fatalistic religious account where god's curse on Eve describes all women's problems as just punishment for women's naturally greater sinfulness, towards more psychological accounts. The more modern version sees women's 'troubles' as arising from their own minds, inability to accept their 'role', failure to enjoy their sexuality, and so forth. Women's pains are then blamed on women themselves as individuals in a new way, one woman set against another.

History can be seen as a sequence of differing forms of sex conflict. Since, as I have said, the way in which menstruation is defined in patriarchal societies will always be linked to the way in which women themselves are defined, there will always be conflict between women and men over this definition. We can expect to see an intensification of this conflict in times when the sex conflict takes articulate shape and women organise as women.

A third set of issues I have tried to investigate is that

of the relation between individual men and the social system of patriarchy, male domination of women.

Existing theory on menstruation contains a number of different views of men's place in creating social attitudes towards it. The most widespread tendency is not to mention men at all. Menstrual 'taboos' are described as coming from the past, from 'age-old' social attitudes and superstitious beliefs. 'Society' holds these ideas and no one in particular is responsible for this or benefits from it. It is often felt to be a little mysterious that 'modern' society 'still' holds such old-fashioned beliefs. This extract from the section on "Society's attitude" in Judy Lever's book on premenstrual tension is a classic example of this type of logic:

> "Society, since way back when, has generally treated menstruation as something to be ashamed of and hidden away, in contrast to pregnancy (the other side of menstruation) which is a proud event to be announced and welcomed. In many early primitive societies, women were, and in some tribes still are, banished from the main house and made to stay in a private hut during menstruation. They may not bathe, eat or touch their bodies, and have to remain in a crouched position the whole time. Above all, no men can come near them during this time, for fear of their lives." (Lever 1979)

Another related set of ideas is one based in psychoanalysis - that is, that men more or less spontaneously react to

aspects of women's bodies in a negative way. This reaction is said to be unconscious, and social processes are said to derive finally from this 'deep' reaction. Men are seen as out of control of their behaviour, irrational. Shuttle and Redgrove's The Wise Wound belongs to this school.

Related to this last set of ideas is the 'womb-envy' school. Its feminist incarnation can be found in Adrienne Rich's Of Women Born, but it originates with post-Freudian psychoanalytic writers like Karen Horney and Bruno Bettelheim. This group recognises that power is involved rather than simply reducing the question to one of sexuality, seen as non-political.

Women are said to have an important kind of 'natural' power in their ability to bear children. Men's devaluation of this ability is (re)interpreted as a reaction of awe and envy. Men are believed to have created a whole range of social institutions including the patriarchal family in order to assert and reinforce the weak connection of the male to his own offspring, and to bring reproductive power under male control. Often within these theories men are said to fear and therefore to hate women and especially women's reproductive organs - this is how menstrual 'taboos' are explained.

There is a lot of evidence, I think, that men often use myths of male creation (such as the christian one) to attempt to appropriate the power they see attached to

reproduction (cf Mary Daly 1978). But since very few men express any particular interest in childbearing, or much sense of lack of power in their own position as a sex, such theories when applied to individual men rest upon alleged unconscious motivations. It seems to me entirely possible that a culture which only values men's abilities and men's creations, and which regards women as men's property, might give ample compensations for the inability to bear children from one's own body. The idea that men, even within such a culture, are likely to feel great unconscious anxiety for this reason I find unconvincing.

It is not really possible for a sociological study to investigate claims about the unconscious. However, it seems to me that one need only resort to the unconscious for explanations of a behaviour when the behaviour in question makes no sense in more ordinary terms. Radical feminists say that men benefit from women's oppression, and that individual men often play an active part in creating that oppression. I would see relations around menstruation as part of this system of power relations between the sexes.

In gathering my empirical evidence I have tried to probe especially questions of how men themselves thought they had acquired the attitudes and beliefs they had. And in analysing my data, I have looked at the sexual-political consequences of men's ideas and behaviour. If my explanations seem inadequate, perhaps we should turn to the unconscious -it is surely illogical, though, to <u>begin</u> one's

investigation with an assumption that such behaviours arise from the unconscious.

One further view of men's part in creating menstrual 'taboos' is that it is unimportant, and that women actually originated these social practices. Later I will examine the evidence used to support this idea. For now, let us note that this 'man question' is an important one, and one which has attracted a good deal of attention from those who have written about menstruation as well, of course, as from feminist theorists generally.

The fourth problem area my work concerns itself with is broadly that of epistemology as applied to feminism. At present British feminist sociologists are engaged in a complex debate about methodology, which has encompassed issues of method and of epistemology. All feminists must of necessity concern themselves with the nature of women's consciousness. I will look in greater detail at these issues in Chapter 3, placing myself within this particular debate about methdology, but linking my ideas on method very much to the wider questions of the sociology of knowledge.

As will be clear from this summary, much of the feminist work which has been done on menstruation comes from the psychoanalytic/matriarchalist and the essentialist radical feminist schools of thought. (Shuttle and Redgrove 1978; Weideger 1978; Culpepper 1979; Matriarchy Study Group

undated; Delaney et al 1976). Social practices around menstruation, being so clearly about gender, and so inexplicable to women generally, have been used as strong evidence that men the world over and throughout time are irrationally driven to oppress women, and/or that women universally seek separation from men at this time. It is this area of discourse about menstruation that I want to reconsider in detail. It is not an internally consistent set of ideas, so I will not look at its logic, but will look separately at some of the propositions on which it is based. Chapter 7 on menstruation's relation to reproduction also addresses one of the assumptions often made by this school of thought.

What I am concerned to develop is another kind of radical feminism - one with a social-constructionist basis. Radical feminism is characterised by its development of theories about the oppression of women which take that oppression to be unique and fundamental, that is, not deriving from some other social structure, such as economic class. Radical feminists also see sex conflict as an inherent part of male-dominated society: women, like every oppressed people, resist their oppression, even where they do not do so in an open and organised fashion. I believe that radical feminism should, further, absolutely clearly reject the idea that sex conflict is a natural fact, and should see it as a social phenomenon arising from power relationships. I see no reason why these two propositions should not be reconciled together.

In the rest of this chapter, I will look in detail at two of the propositions which underlie much of what has been written by these schools of feminist thought - firstly, that menstrual 'taboos' are found in all human societies and secondly (an argument which is special to the matriarchalist school) that it was women who originated menstrual 'taboos'.

2.2 IS MENSTRUAL ETIQUETTE UNIVERSAL?

One very common statement about social attitudes to menstruation is that "menstrual taboos are universal" (eg Weideger 1978). This idea is clearly tied to the idea that relations between the sexes follow fundamentally the same pattern in every human society. If change in gender relations is to be held to be possible, this deterministic view must be brought into question. It cannot be taken for granted that people in vastly differing cultures somehow 'naturally' reproduce essentially the same gender relationships. Therefore I have attempted to investigate this proposition empirically.

I have approached this in two ways, neither of which has been entirely satisfactory. Firstly I read a great deal of anthropology, seeking information about other cultures, and secondly my investigation of men's attitudes in this culture has attempted to look at the question of whether men in one culture will react to menstruation in a

consistent way. This latter project will be reported on later in the thesis. One of the conclusions I drew from it which seems worth mentioning here is that 'taboo' is an inappropriate word for what takes place in relation to menstruation in this culture, for it leads one to expect to encounter supernatural beliefs which are in practice largely absent. I propose to use instead the idea of an 'etiquette', since this describes more exactly a set of social practices which express and reinforce the distinctions between people of different social statuses, without implying anything about supernatural belief. In this case the etiquette marks out the hierarchy of power between men and women. This is more fully discussed in Chapter 5.

Reading anthropology in search of answers to feminist questions was a depressing experience. So much of the evidence comes from such very questionable sources - male investigators whose main concerns were with quite other questions, and who were not sensitised to the sexual politics of who says what to whom. Much of the material I read which related specifically to menstruation had been heavily influenced by psychoanalytic thought, and as a result paid little or no attention to what the people concerned believed themselves to be doing in their social practices (eg Stephens 1961). Even writers who are attempting to challenge this tendency fail to free themselves from their own ethnocentric assumptions. Young and Bacardayan, in their essay "Menstrual Taboos and Social

Rigidity" (1965) do not consider the possibility that cultures exist where menstruation is not socially emphasised in any way. In their categorisation, those cultures with the least marked menstrual etiquette are described as those where "concern for menstruation is informal" (p.96). They suggest that this situation might involve couples practicing informal avoidance during a woman's period or men being "privately disgusted". Perhaps Young and Bacardayan were limited by the sample of cultures they worked on (they give only pragmatic explanations, and no theoretical context, for their choices) - but if this were so, surely they should not generalise from such a sample?

But what evidence have I for maintaining that all cultures may not emphasise menstruation? I have not discovered an ethnography which describes a culture which does not do so. I have not even attempted the enormous quantity of reading involved in such a quest, for clearly the fact that an ethnographer had failed to mention menstrual restrictions would not be conclusive proof that none existed, especially when so many ethnographers are men. One would really have to involve oneself in another ethnographic study to check the evidence. I have preferred to begin by concentrating on this culture.

But some authoritative sources do encourage the belief that such cultures exist. Mary Douglas, in her essay on "Couvade and Menstruation" (1975) writes "I cannot think of

any physical condition of which the ritual treatment is constant across the globe". Even corpse pollution, she says, is not universal. Per Hage and Frank Hararay (1981), who have reviewed the literature on the New Guinea Highlands, write that "Beliefs in menstrual pollution and more particularly in poisoning are not universal in Highland New Guinea". The Etoro on the Papuan Plateau, for instance, hold no such beliefs (Kelly 1976). This is especially interesting since some cultures in that area have very intense pollution beliefs and practice strict menstrual segregation. Birke and Best (1980) cite another case: the Congo Pygmies, who are encouraged to "sleep with the moon" in order to conceive, and who associate menstrual blood with life (Turnbull 1976).

Young and Bacardayan also, obliquely, acknowledge that they know of cultures where menstruation is not much emphasised, though they unfortunately give no details:

> "Surely the most obvious interpretation of menstrual taboos is that they are institutional ways in which males in primitive society discriminate against females. While it is possible that women do not object to being so restricted, and very likely they become accustomed to the rules, it is probable that they submit to such customs only because the male-dominated system of social control leaves them no alternative. It is certainly a fact that, as Western standards have spread, menstrual taboos have been abandoned and not resumed."

This passage is full of extraordinary assumptions; among them that 'Western' society is not male dominated! These authors do not see any significance in the "informal" ways in which their own culture marks menstruation - they seem to see that as normal or even natural. They seem to assume, also, that the impact of Western culture upon 'primitive' societies has tended to increase women's status in such cultures, something which cannot be so easily taken for granted (cf Boserup 1970). This said, it would have been interesting to see an account of a particular case where the social treatment of menstruation has changed, and a close analysis of what the factors involved in such a change could be.

There is evidence, then, that 'menstrual taboos' may not be 'universal'. The fact remains, though, that a very great majority of known cultures do emphasise menstruation in some way. I would suggest that this may be because it is an obvious physical function for men in a patriarchal society to use as a marker of femaleness, to convey their view of a woman's place.

It is a physical event in women which has no necessary connection to men, but which is used to enforce upon women a sense of their being 'naturally' connected to men. The etiquette of menstruation emphasises to women that their ordinary existence can have effects upon men independently of their intentions. They are required to allow for this in their every action, to watch themselves carefully so as

not to unwittingly transgress against the rules.

The one thing girls at menarche are almost always told in this culture is that men must not know. In others, for example among Australian Aborigines as described by Crawley (1902), women had to paint themselves red so that everyone would know and could avoid them. Women are held responsible for protecting men from being polluted by themselves. Carelessness in this can in some cultures get a woman killed. In the West, I have repeatedly seen young girls quoted as saying they would rather die than have the boys know (eg Whiting undated).

The female body is construed as inherently affecting men - this construction relates closely to the equally common cultural practice of enforcing heterosexuality upon women. Let us look from this point of view at the Arapesh ceremony of first menstruation; my account is simplified from Margaret Mead's description in Male and Female (1950; pp 173-4).

The young girl is already married at menarche and living among her husband's family. She fasts for five or six days, staying in her menstrual hut, which her brothers have built for her. When she emerges, weak with hunger, she is prepared in various ways and then brought, supported by other women, to her husband. He has made a special bowl of soup for her, from which he feeds her - after the first few mouthfuls she is strong enough to feed herself.

So the girl becomes a woman in the same moment that her relationship to men is spelt out to her. She is isolated and weakened and then shown that her husband is essential to her survival. She learns her role - as Mead describes it elsewhere (p.80) - she is to be "passive, dependent, cherished".

I have tried, later, to look at how the practices of our own culture spell out to women messages about male superiority and about heterosexuality. Other writers have recognised the connection of traditional menstrual restrictions with heterosexuality - in this passage from her book The MsTaken Body Jeanette Kupfermann defends them on this basis.

> "Without religious values, menstruation can have no value either; at most a few ad hoc cults might be resurrected, but they, too, cannot be vested with any true meaning, as they will not be able truly to relate the individual to the universe.
>
> One such cult is described by Paula Weideger in Female Cycles where she rightly considers menstruation in the same context as the menopause and female sexuality generally, but still limits her view to a 'sexual' one rather than a cosmological one. It recounts a long letter from a travelling lesbian commune in which two women recounted the individual experiences and menstrual histories of the members and described the pattern of menstrual synchrony that evolved as they lived and travelled together. But the same feminist diatribe mars the otherwise valid

> suggestion that women attempt some kind of separatism when she suggests that lesbians can 'help heterosexual women to understand the extent to which fear of men's opinions and male power limits the search for self-knowledge'. Most women, however, do not live in communes of travelling lesbians, and their phenomenological stance is quite a different one. Most women would probably prefer to know how they could experience their menstruation to help them relate to men and the world generally."
>
> (Kupfermann 1979:59)

Clearly, different cultures have very different ranges of expectations of what a woman should be. Forms of marriage and family vary, as does the work women do, and the images women and men have of womanly behaviour. Notions of what is 'natural' are very variable, and attitudes to bodies generally change enormously across different cultures. It is not surprising then that among those cultures which do emphasise menstruation, the form that this takes varies greatly. I do not think it is useful to reduce this complexity to general statements about 'taboos', for we can learn much about how men's domination of women works in different situations from a close study of such details.

Jessica Mayer (BMAS paper 1983) makes some very interesting points here. She notes the problem that the common focus of anthropologists upon pollution concepts tends to bracket out consideration of gender distinctions. At the same

time, though, she warns against "reducing pollution to gender", for this closes off the way in which particular configurations of gender interact with other social variables. She discusses some specific examples of sexual pollution and points out how, among the Amora of New Guinea, pollution only really applied between husband and wife. The people explicitly related the danger that men might be poisoned with menstrual blood to the fact that wives were held to be permanently angry with their husbands and husbands' brothers - they could also transmit illness by speaking angrily over their food. Mayer argues that since these beliefs pertain to a special relationship between men and women they should not be interpreted as a belief that menstruating women are inherently polluting.

It seems to me very important to distinguish between the various different social practices related to menstruation. As I.M. Lewis (1971) distinguishes sorcery, where a person (often a socially powerful person) is believed to be able to cause harm to another by conscious <u>effort</u>, from the witch-craft accusation where a person (usually of low or marginal social status) is accused of being dangerous to others <u>in themselves</u>. we must always note the difference between a belief that someone can use a substance to cause harm and a belief that a category of people are polluting.

In the same way, it is important to make the distinction between rules of etiquette which are backed by supernatural sanctions, which can rightly be called 'taboos', and rules

of etiquette which are not. Some cultures emphasise menstrual pollution to the extent that it could be called one of the central concerns of the cultures, at least vis a vis women, for example the people of Mount Hagen, New Guinea, described by Marilyn Strathern (1972). It makes no sense to conflate this sort of situation with any cultural marking of menstruation, however minor. The World Health Organisation's cross-cultural study Patterns and Perceptions of Menstruation (Snowden and Christian 1983), although it worked with large numbers and used methods of no very great sensitivity, found a very considerable variation in the beliefs and practices related to menstruation among the 14 socio-cultural groups it surveyed.

This is, of course, an under-researched field, but there is evidence to suggest that menstrual etiquette varies greatly from one culture to another, and that there may be cultures where menstruation is minimally culturally elaborated. The immense variety of cultural practices relating to menstruation suggests that it may be unhelpful to seek 'universal' explanations for such practices. The study of menstrual etiquette can teach us far more if we attend to the detail of each culture's ways, rather than reducing our picture of them to a single dimension, that which can be universalised.

In my work on my own culture I have attempted to draw out the range of different set of ideas which exist, and the

ways in which these in practice affect people's behaviour. I hope it will be clear that what emerges cannot be adequately imagined as merely a mild, 'civilised' version of the practices of 'other cultures'.

2.3 DID WOMEN INVENT MENSTRUAL ETIQUETTE?

The idea that women originated taboos on contact with men during menstruction is one which has been put forward by a number of feminists in recent years: the Matriarchy Study Group, Elizabeth Gould Davis (1971) and Evelyn Reed (1975), among others.

One can see where such an idea comes from. The male dogma of this culture has it that men want to have sex with women at all times, in all circumstances - this stands in contradiction to the sexual 'taboo' of menstruation. Also men accuse women of using menstruation as an excuse to avoid unwanted sex - and some women are undoubtedly aware of having done exactly this. It is not immediately apparent how the sex 'taboo' serves the interests of men. I will look at this issue again in relation to my own evidence, but now I want to look at the arguments presented for this explanation.

This line of argument goes hand in hand with a particular idea of human history - that all world societies have 'evolved' in essentially one direction: from primitive

matriarchy to patriarchy. These writers use anthropological and archaeological evidence to assert the existence of widespread prehistorical matriarchal civilisation. This prehistory is taken to explain men's present-day treatment of women: men hate women because they were formerly subjugated by them. They retaliate against their "former master" (Davis 1971:148). There has been a good deal of debate about the adequacy of the evidence that such societies existed - a debate I will not go into here. It is enough to say that the case is far from proven.

What I want to look at is the evidence and the logic used in relation to the particular case of menstrual taboos. All these writers refer for their evidence on this issue to a very few sources, the most important of which are Robert Briffault's The Mothers (1927) and Ernest Crawley's The Mystic Rose (1902).

Both these books use for evidence anthropology and travellers' reports from the nineteenth century and sometimes earlier, but their conclusions seem to me to have little to do with the information they present. They have more to do with their notion of what 'Woman' is or should be. Briffault, for instance, gives page upon page of accounts of menstrual and puerperal taboos and menarche ceremonies from a wide variety of societies, not all of them by any means primitive even in the sense of using only simple technology. Here are some examples from the book of the kind of practices, relating to menarche and to

menstruation generally, which he cites: specific examples are never given when later writers refer to these pages. The detail seems to me to produce a quite different impression from the usual generalisations.

> "Among the Eskimo,...'the women must live secluded for so many days, and it would be a great offence for her to enter any other hut during the time' (F.C. Hall, Arctic Researches). They are subject to special dietary regulations and ... they may have to go a week without eating, although the family may be living in the midst of abundance." (Briffault 1927:p.366)

> "On the island of Kadiak, off the coast of Alaska, women... had to retire to little huts, or hovels, built of reeds and grass, which were about 4 feet long, 2.5 feet wide, and less than 3 feet high... their food was reached out to them at the end of a stick... Among the Tlinkit, when a girl first menstruated, she was immediately shut up in an isolated hut.. She was not permitted to lie down during the whole period of her seclusion, but had to sleep propped up with logs." (p.367)

Briffault quotes G.H. Loskiel's History of the Mission of the United Brethren among the Indians of North America:

> "When a Delaware girl it out of order for the first time, she must withdraw to a hut at some distance from the village. Her head is wrapped up for twelve days so that she can see nobody, and she must submit to

purgings, vomits and fastings, and abstain from all labour." (p.369-370).

"Among the Guayquiry of the Orinoco, menstruous women were secluded and a girl before marriage had to fast for forty days." A Guayquiry chief is quoted as explaining to a Father Gumilla that 'in order that women's bodies should not contain this poison, we should make them fast,.... for forty days. Thus they are thoroughly dried up, and are no longer dangerous, or at least not so much as they formerly were' (p.371).

"Among many Brazilian tribes a girl at her first menstruation is suspended in a hammock under the roof of the hut,and subject to the most severe fumigation as well as being starved. Thus among the Guaranis the girls were sewn up in their hammock in the same manner as those tribes sew up corpses, only the smallest opening being left to allow them to breathe; they were suspended over the fire in that condition for several days... It not infrequently happens that the unfortunate girls die under the severity of the process of disinfection to which they are subjected." (p.371)

"Among the Ticunas the girls are shut up, when they menstruate, in a dark hut, all their hair is plucked out, and they are subjected by the women to a severe

flagellation." (p.372)

"Not long since there were in Parsi communities public menstrual houses where women resorted at their periods. The women had to remain entirely silent, and their food was handed to them with every precaution from a distance.

... Among the Hindus,... it is laid down in the Institutes of Vishnu that if a woman in her courses should touch an Aryan, she shall be lashed with a whip." (p.376)

"In Ceram a special hut is built for women... but on no account are they to eat any fish from the river. Not many years ago a young woman was solemnly tried on the charge of having eaten a fish while she was unclean; she was condemned and executed in the presence of the people, by being thrown from a rock into the river..." (p.380)

Crawley tells many more similar stories, among them of an "Australian (aborigine), finding that his wife had lain on his blanket during menstruation, (who) killed her, and died of terror in a fortnight." (p.76)

Now I make no judgement on the accuracy of these reports - I give them here to show what kind of evidence these writers use to support their argument. It seems to me perfectly plain that these 'customs' are not ones which

women would be likely to encourage. Considerable violence against women is involved in these practices. There are cultures (our own included) where powerful people, usually men, do submit to painful rituals as part of their initiation into a privileged group. The indications from the manner of telling of these customs are, however, that the concern is for the safety of other people, and not for the woman in question. The way in which punishments are reported for transgressing the rules of these customs implies that compulsion is involved, that women tend to rebel against them rather than regarding them as a privilege. We should bear in mind, also, that all these have been reported by men to men, so we do not have access to what the women might have told us.

But none of this is clear to Briffault. He believes that all these practices derived from the taboo on sexual intercourse during menstruation and that <u>that</u> derives from the female's natural instinct to refuse sex to the male. Female mammals, he says, refuse the male at all times except during oestrus ('heat'). Therefore, although men are always ready for sex, it is biologically necessary that women should refuse men at some time. Ernest Crawley, on a slightly different tack, puts it all down to women's "subconscious physical fear of men". So for them all this follows from women being designed to dislike sex. And this has been repeated and repeated.

What we see is the image of turn of the century hetero-

sexuality projected onto pre-history (or rather onto these "primitive" cultures presented as the prehistory of "civilisation"). Women naturally do not enjoy sex and they will use any trick they can think of to get out of it.
So our attention is distracted from the question of why it is during menstruation that sex was to be avoided - why women's fear of men or dislike of sex should overcome them at these moments particularly. We are also not encouraged to think about the systematic violence against women which these taboo practices apparently involved.

Crawley (1902) is explicit about the purpose of his project: he looks at the ways of people he thinks primitive in order to discover the "past" of his own society. He refers throughout to the "lower races", "the savage mind", and sees them as childlike, as more subject to domination by instinct or the unconscious than "those more favoured by descent". The basic method that these writers use, of generalising across 'other' cultures about which they knew very little, is plainly racist.

The modern matriarchalist writers use very much the same line of argument. It is taken for granted that it is in women's interests to avoid sex. For example, Davis (1971) suggests that taboos on women's blood were imposed in "the gynocratic age" to protect menstruating girls and women from "the brutal rages of their male relatives". She rejects the idea that such taboos exist to protect men, for "certainly intercourse during menstruation or pregnancy is

fraught with more danger to the female than the male". She compares the magical beliefs attached to rules against sex during periods to tales of hobgoblins told by nurses to instill fear into the children in their charge (p.92). But why were women in a matriarchy living in fear of men's violent tempers? Why did they have to invent stories to protect themselves? And in what way is sexual intercourse dangerous to women at such times? One can see that violent sex of the classic patriarchal kind is in one way more dangerous to women during pregnancy than at other times, for it can induce miscarriage, but why should it be any worse during menstruation? There is a failure of imagination here, for Davis sees men and heterosexuality as basically having the same character in matriarchal cultures as in patriarchal. This is particularly odd since elsewhere Davis would have it that women in such time enjoyed penetrative heterosexual intercourse to the extent that they could have influenced evolution by selecting for men with larger penises (pp 95/6; 37).

Beyond the specific area of sexuality, I think this piece of mythology about 'primitive' society reflects the interest of some women in our culture now in the idea of periodic withdrawals from 'society' (i.e. men). Women who dislike or feel ambivalent about men are attracted to the idea that there is some 'natural' urge in <u>all</u> women to separate themselves from men. This they see expressed in the practice of menstrual segregation, menstrual huts.

Again, though, the popular image of such segregation bears little relationship to reported reality. Menstrual huts as described in the literature (Briffault, Crawley, Mead) are generally clearly uncomfortable and unpleasant to be in. They enact the 'special' oppressed status of women - either they are individual huts, isolated on the margins of the settlement, or they are placed centrally in the village so that the men can be certain that the women are staying in 'their place'.

Women of religious and cultural groups which practice menstrual rituals, such as Muslims and Orthodox Jews, are sometimes reported to say that they enjoy the process of segregation and purification. They do not, they say 'feel oppressed'. Jeannette Kupfermann in The MsTaken Body argues that such women are better off than those of us living outside such faith. But what is quite clear is that the satisfaction these women refer to is that of feeling integrated into their community, their religion, of marking their commitment to their particular forms of marriage. That they should express this militantly as demonstrating the superiority of their way of life is entirely understandable given that all these groups are despised by the racist dominant culture of this country.

Separation from men, when it is defined and enforced by men and when it forms part of the enactment of the inferiority of women, is an entirely different matter from autonomy from men. Being free to be alone or with other women when

you want to be is not the same as being put aside at a particular time because you belong to the group 'women'.

It is necessary to stretch one's imagination to see beyond the confines of a discussion which compares one set of patriarchal restrictions upon women with another and tries to weigh up the costs and benefits of each system. There is no image to turn to of women unrestrained by patriarchy, but one must beware of therefore mythologising other women's experiences without fully understanding their circumstances.

2.4. A SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIONIST RADICAL FEMINISM

As I have said, I see my work as an exercise in developing a social-constructionist radical feminism. I have been concerned therefore to look at the social treatment of menstruation as an aspect of the playing out of the social power struggle between women and men.

I have rejected the idea that one can discover a universal 'truth' about biology beneath social distortions, seeking instead to describe and as far as possible to explicate the social meanings themselves and how competing social definitions interact. What follows is an attempt to summarise the way I have come to see men's definitions of menstruation in this society.

Men maintain their social power over women in part through an ideology which defines women as inferior to men, and as naturally fitting into the place men have designed for them. This includes universal heterosexuality and in many cultures universal motherhood. The sex hierarchy is also expressed and reinforced by an elaborate etiquette which regulates relations between the sexes, one part of which governs how menstruation should be dealt with and spoken of. In our culture, menstruation is not especially emphasized, but male definitions nevertheless prevent women from generating positive self/woman-centred understandings of it for themselves.

Patriarchal ideology is produced and sustained in a variety of ways. Male groups in this society produce a sexist culture which contains reference to menstruation - jokes which men see as "sick", which centre upon sex during menstruation, often linking it with violence (see Chapter 6). They accuse women of "using" periods to "get out of things" - defining this as an illegitimate use of power on women's part.

Medical men, especially gynaecologists, produce another important kind of ideology about women. They emphasise women's reproductive role as the only hope of health for women. Menstrual disorders are seen as the result of refusal to conform to the female role. Medical men institutionalise men's failure to empathise with female suffering and justify it with the notion that inconvenient

women's problems are "psychosomatic" - that is, imaginary. Doctors frequently ascribe a woman's problems to her mother's influence, suggesting that mothers inculcate 'unhealthy' attitudes into their daughters. They seek to persuade women to place their trust in male authority, not in female support. Some female experiences can be distorted to fit men's ideas about women's inferiority - for example women's experiences of physical and mental changes during the menstrual cycle have been used, named "premenstrual tension", to put women down as unreliable and out of control of their behaviour(see Chapter 9,10 and 11).

Inidividual men are able then to use the various elements within the ideology to manipulate individual relationships with women to their own advantage. Present day British male culture on menstruation and sexuality gives men the choice as to whether or not to engage in sexual intercourse during menstruation - women are not so free to make this choice since they must fear both on the one hand male disgust, and on the other, the consequences of refusal to be available.

The etiquette of menstruation decrees that women may not make men aware of the existence of menstruation either in general or in the particular. There is however no sanction against men referring to it. For example women very rarely mention menstruation in the workplace even to excuse themselves because of menstrual pain. But men often explain women's behaviour when they disapprove of it as the

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result of 'the time of the month'.

Women on the whole do not draw attention to their own periods in public, out of a sense of shame - behind which subjective experience lies the fact that women who do so are ridiculed and harassed by men. Women in this country who have attempted to publicly challenge the discriminatory taxation of sanitary wear have been alternately mocked and ignored, effectively kept out of the public sphere. Men find reference to sanitary wear highly offensive. One consequence of this etiquette is that in dealing with their periods, women are obliged to be constantly aware of men.

Knowledge of a woman's menstruation becomes, for some, something specially reserved for the heterosexual relationship: it must be kept carefully hidden from all other men including one's father and one's sons. Thus the experience of menstruation is reconstructed in such a way as to emphasise an image of women's lives as circumscribed by men's gaze - even while men themselves may be very little concerned with the matter.

In setting out the sexist ways in which menstruation is defined by men, I want to make it clear that I do not imagine there to be some simple alternative, a spontaneous, 'positive', female view of menstruation. Women's experiences of periods vary greatly, and are of course socially moulded. There is no need, though, for women to romanticise our physical characteristics in order to see the pos-

sibility that we need not allow them to be used against us.

Just as men are not spontaneously, biologically, driven into certain attitudes towards women's bodies, so for women themselves there is no single physical reality. In discussing menstrual problems some of the consequences of women's diverse experiences will be explored. The Appendix which presents letters women wrote to the campaign against VAT on sanitary wear, also shows that women do not unite straightforwardly as a biological group, but may take up 'biological' issues as a social group with a consciousness of their social situation.

Written out so briefly, my vision of this culture's treatment of menstruation looks almost programmatic, as if everything was very simple and clear - in fact as will emerge, I see the social meanings of menstruation in this culture as a thoroughly messy area of discourse. If one refuses biologistic explanations, it is also impossible to find simple theories to account for social phenomena. Complex though they will be, however, social-constructionist feminist understandings can help us to understand our experiences. There are many different sets of ideas which bear upon menstruation - on pain, on sex, on dirt, as well as on gender - and individuals (women and men) generally hold a number of inconsistent, overlapping notions about it. I have tried to make sense of some strands within this tangle of ideas, and particularly of the sexual politics which are attached to them.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

"Research methods represent lines of action taken toward the empirical world" (Denzin 1970:298) - this chapter recounts the process by which I arrived at the lines of action I have taken in this research. My original research proposal was very wide in its scope - I wanted to examine the phenomenon of menstruation from a sociological point of view. There were a set of paradoxes which interested me: a 'taboo' subject which women discuss among themselves; a kind of pain which is without purpose; a feature of womanhood which is at once a sign of fertility and of the absence of pregnancy. But such questions as these are not possible to approach directly. My final project remains, I think, unusually close to its original conception, but this has been arrived at in decidedly crab-like fashion.

My deliberations about methods were influenced primarily by the subject I had chosen, but also by debates which were going on among sociologists about the significance of methodology, especially the debates around the question of whether or not a feminist methodology exists, and if so, what it might be.

3.1 FEMINIST RESEARCH?

The debate around feminist research has been too broad for it to be relevant to recount the whole course of it in this chapter (see eg: Ehrlich 1978; Eichler 1980; Fildes 1983; McRobbie 1982; Roberts 1981; Stanley and Wise 1979, 1983). For a time I saw the search for a specifically feminist methodology as an indistinguishable task from my problem of deciding what to do in my own research. But it was helpful for me to approach this debate with a particular project in mind, for it meant that I had to apply everyone's general statements to a specific issue. What eventually became clear to me was that the debate was at least in part an attempt to define certain kinds of research as not feminist by the nature of their methods, rather than to discover what might be good approaches.

Sometimes the claims made are clearly for certain kinds of theory within feminism, rather than for anything which could be said to typify feminism as such. Stanley and Wise (1983), for example, while maintaining that they do not want there to be a feminist 'line' on research, say in their introduction that "Much of what we have written insists that feminism, for us, means accepting the essential validity of other people's experiences." (p.8) They place 'experience' above theory in importance, but fail to explore the extremely problematic nature of experience.

My view is that, on the contrary, unless the term 'feminism' means nothing, feminist research can only be defined by its theory. To me, a minimal definition of feminism would be that it means a belief that women are oppressed and a commitment to end that oppression. Such a belief can only be called a kind of social theory. Within that, however, there is space for enormously varied theories about all the contingent questions raised by that first proposition. Thus different methods will follow from different theories within feminism. It would be wrong to attempt to close off the political debates within feminism by making some special claim for one, based on the methods of research it espouses.

It seems to me now that feminist research faces in fact very much the same problems as all other research, and feminists cannot be expected to produce unique solutions to these problems, although feminism does form a basis for useful critiques of traditional research practices. What distinguishes feminist research is that it asks feminist questions (Dickens et al., 1983).

Other parts of the discussion around feminist research have focused on interviewing and on research ethics, and I will return to these issues later in this chapter. First I will describe what is in part the outcome of my participation in these debates: what I actually did.

I will give a chronological account of how I arrived at the

methods I eventually used. At the start of my research, I re-read a number of classic texts of sociology seeking helpful hints on how to proceed. One of the most useful of these was C. Wright Mills' suggestion of keeping a research journal (1959). It is because I did this that I can reconstruct some of the logic I followed in my work. I found on re-reading it that I had quite forgotten the sequence of events, and indeed some entire thought processses which I had since lost interest in.

3.1.1 Menstruation: a Single Phenomenon?

When I began this research, there were several questions of theory which I had to resolve before I could decide what empirical evidence to seek. Crucially, I needed to consider the issue of whether or not 'menstruation' could be taken to be a unitary phenomenon. If menstruation everywhere gives rise to essentially the same social process, then one must look at the biological 'base' to determine what it is about it which causes this. This could be done purely theoretically or by looking at a range of cultures and identifying common themes, or sets of themes which differ from one another in structured ways.

As I have said, the great majority of theories about menstruation are deterministic in these ways. Durkheim thought attitudes to menstruation derived from a "primitive" fear of blood (1898); Mary O'Brien sees it as a "negative moment" of reproduction (1981); Shuttle and Redgrove (1978)

regard it as representing the active, non-reproductive, "other dimension" of women's sexuality; Adrienne Rich describes it as a source of power, an act of transformation (1977); Paige and Paige (1981) say that menstruation betokens women's reproductive capacity. This kind of approach could be called essentialist, and I shall argue elsewhere against its logic and consequences.

For the purposes of this chapter I mention it to explain that the first months of my work were taken up with reading feminist theory and anthropology, as I struggled with this question. As I have said, the 'method' of reading ethnographies and anthropological theory in order to investigate whether or not menstruation could be seen as in any way socially 'constant' across cultures was most frustrating. Seeking information about menstruation gives one a particularly sensitive lens through which to observe the sexual politics of the study of other cultures.

Nevertheless, I found enough evidence to convince me that there is enormous variation in how menstruation is viewed cross-culturally. For each one of the essentialist explanations offered, one could find a reported case which contradicts it - there clearly were 'other' cultures which did not fit these theories. But these theories also take for granted some image of how their <u>own</u> cultures deal with it - an image which equally did not fit well with my own observations. I began to define my task more closely as that of reaching a description of this society's treatment

of menstruation. This decided, it was more possible to think about what exactly I should do.

3.1.2 Where to Look for Evidence?

How, then, can a sociologist go about the task of describing the social meanings of such a phenomenon as menstruation? What can be used as evidence? Even the briefest consideration of the problem reveals that within our culture there is no single shared understanding of menstruation. The phenomenologist's view of the social world comes into its own - we can see that different people hold different ideas about it, see it as significant within different contexts, and that certain groups of people may share certain meanings that they attach to it.

But while social understandings of menstruation are not monolithic, neither are they chaotic - different understandings will tend to belong to structurally differing social groups. The sociologist's task is to pull out as clearly as possible some of the parameters of this structure, to try to make some sense of a very complex situation. So whose definitions should we examine? What aspect of the social world can be usefully analysed? There are two different kinds of problems here, which can only be looked at together, but which are analytically separable.

The first is the question of whose understandings are accessible to our methods, whose perspective is knowable.

The second is a practical question - we must take some arbitrary decision about where to begin our investigation, knowing that one study cannot 'do everything'. This question was to me a crucial political problem - a choice between putting the emphasis upon the issue of how women make sense of their world or focusing upon the ideas and ideologies, coming mainly from men, which confront women.

I raise the first of these problems here in order to note its presence throughout my work - it is not one I feel I have resolved at all satisfactorily. To give an example of how this impinged upon the work - it presented itself to me very early on in relation to the issues of premenstrual tension and menstrual pain. Examining social constructions of phenomena we experience as physical sensations produces an alarming effect in introducing doubt about the reality of one's own senses. As Naomi Pfeffer (1984 personal communication) wrote to me after reading some of my work, finally "How do you know that your period pain is not just a bad case of false consciousness?" Can we go anywhere beyond the presentation of different perspectives, to any judgement of even our own understandings? I believe this to be a profound problem for the sociology of health and illness.

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Returning to the question of where to start, I should explain that it was never in doubt for me that I had to place my own consciousness explicitly at the centre of my research. The false style of objectivity, which denies the

researcher's specific perspectives and interests in what she is doing, is a mystifying practice and encourages lazy and dishonest thought. It is a crucial tenet of my feminist politics that women must learn to act openly on our own account, not forever claiming to act only out of altruism or disinterestedly. I was resolved to guard against the academic habit of what Mary Daly (1978:324) calls "spooking by the passive voice", the use of a grammar which hides the agent in what is written. I know that I have not fully succeeded in this, and will later discuss the specific problems I have experienced in making my own consciousness felt - problems due, I think, to my particular social location. However, I have tried in various ways to constantly refer back to my own experince and my own responses to the research process. This has meant that in deciding where to begin analysing the social structure I referred to what I wanted to know more than to any other standard.

3.1.3 Interviewing Women?

When I began my research I took it more or less for granted that I would interview women: the questions I had in my mind were more about which women, how best to conduct the interviews and so forth. I want to discuss here why that was the situation and how I came to change my mind.

In my experience the assumption that a feminist researcher will interview women and the claim that there is a

specifically feminist methodology to be discovered are interconnacted. In the first months of my research I became increasingly concerned about both these issues as I felt them as social pressures upon me. After attending the 1982 BSA Summer School I wrote angrily:

> "... I have been tormented by other people's ideas of what my work should involve. I have felt strongly that my proper place is thought to be behind a clip-board, in a room with another woman, with a tape-recorder between us. Or perhaps even better I should now be labouring over a typewriter transcribing words collected by the above method and agonising about how to arrange them."

I wondered whether what I was experiencing was a manifestation of the dominance of survey research in sociology generally, for which my undergraduate education had not prepared me. But looking around me it was clear that surveys are far from popular in many fields of research within sociology, and indeed 'pure' theory appears to be the norm in many areas. It is feminists, particularly, who are expected to avoid theory.

I felt I was being pushed towards what I came to call the liberal feminist model of research. I saw it as a tendency expressed most clearly at that point in Helen Roberts' collection <u>Doing Feminist Research</u>. I wrote at the time:

> "Typically this form of research involves a woman setting out to interview some sample of other women, preferably women less privileged than herself, working

> class or Black women, but occasionally students or professional women, about some aspect of their lives. She does an unstructured or semi-structured interview, and tapes it, then she writes it up, full of anxiety. The write-up may to some extent convey her own analysis of what is happening to 'her' women, but it must also categorise their responses. These will tend to be seen as different ways of 'coping' or of 'negotiating contradictions'. Women researchers often find that the women in their samples fail to analyse their situation in a feminist way, and are frustrated and disappointed by this."

I felt that such research (while essential) was seriously limited and the pressure to engage in it amounted to a kind of stereotyping of feminists, but also that it was based on politically dangerous assumptions. The first of these is that 'we' do not know enough about how women feel, that the problem in whatever area we are dealing with is that women have not articulated their perspective. Women are then to be 'made visible' by being transformed into reserach findings. I felt that this was a misreading of the function of sociology: that informing the powerful about an oppressed group need not lead to any change on the part of the oppressor.

There is a worrying implication that 'ordinary' women do not express themselves adequately and need academics to translate for them. When I began to say that I was

considering not interviewing women, one argument that was put to me was that "you must let women speak for themselves", as if my failure to interview my quota of women would prevent them from speaking.

I see the dominance of this anxiety as deriving from a common misinterpretation of the feminist practice of consciousness-raising. The original purpose of the process of consciousness-raising, where women speak about their own experiences to other women, was to discover what women have in common, in order to produce theory about women's oppression. Now this last stage seems to have been forgotten and women speaking, whatever it is about and whatever they say, is seen as A Good Thing. Particularly it is supposed to be good for the women themselves. This is a liberal revision in that it focuses on the individual, rather than on ways of creating social change on the large scale. Originally if women found emotional release in consciousness-raising, it was a side effect: it was never the main aim (cf Sarachild 1975). Much of the new 'feminist research' seemed to me to be about an attempt to simulate this revised version of consciousness-raising within the interview situation.

I felt that the interview itself was being given a priority over the whole research process which was problematic. Many writers emphasise the benefits to the interviewee herself as an important aspect of their research (Finch 1984; Oakley 1981). It is notable that John Madge (1953) traces the origins of the sociological interview to the practice of

counselling, psychotherapy: feminists seem to be returning it to its roots. Again the danger is that the problem is located within the individual. Such focus on the research process presents an idea that research can almost be justified by its spin-off benefits, without reference to how the results of the research may be used.

It seems to me that however 'reciprocal' an interview is made, it remains an unequal situation if, when all is said and done, the research is the work of the interviewer and not of the interviewee. She has chosen to create the situation and will ultimately control what is used and what is discarded from the words the interviewee says to her. While of course interviews should be made into pleasant and where possible helpful social situations for interviewees, I cannot see that they can be transformed into some kind of exemplary feminist practice.

With my particular questions about menstruation in my mind, I was especially aware of the dangers of victim-blaming. So much of what is written about menstruation places the problem squarely in the minds of women. If a lot of people in our culture share one 'sociological' idea about periods, it is that women's bad attitudes are responsible for period pain. By interviewing women, especially if that was the only empirical work I did, I could do little to question such notions.

But I had other reasons for being less interested than I

might have been in interviewing women. When I began my research I had been involved in the women's liberation movement for years, and had been present at discussions of menstruation in numerous grops of women - more than one consciousness-raising group, women's health classes, groups of friends. I had not found that my questions were answered in that process - indeed my questions in many ways arose from it. Contradictions remain after women have engaged in introspection among themselves - and I could not see that sociological interviewing would be likely to generate better understandings than feminist consciousness-raising could. The best I could imagine doing would be to demonstrate systematic differences in experience or belief among women - a project I felt was of questionable use. I felt, therefore, that I should use my particular status as sociologist to attempt to discover things that women do not know.

I see myself as answerable to women, as do those women involved in the liberal model of research, but I would want to see the research process as a whole. The most important question for me is about how useful the research is to women as a group - can women learn from it? Whether or not individual women who are involved in the research benefit directly from their involvement, while of course an important ethical problem for the reseracher, must be secondary to this consideration.

Let me be clear that I do think that research which reflects women's experiences back to women can be extremely useful: it

is possible in this way to reveal aspects of women's condition which are not immediately apparent. A great deal of very useful work has resulted from this approach. But feminist research must go beyond the study of women to work out ways of studying for women if it is not to remain an essentially liberal force.

3.1.4 Critique of Ideology

So I came to think that what I could most usefully do would be basically a critique of male ideologies. I saw this partly as a theoretical task, to reconsider the theories through which women, feminists included, have tried to understand the meaning of menstrual 'taboos' and to attempt to find a more helpful theoretical approach. But an empirical element to the study would also be essential, for what constitutes present day British ideology about menstruation could not be taken for granted as known.

My first idea was to look at texts, to describe the medical view of menstruation and menstrual problems more exactly. Some of my early work on premenstrual tension had involved working from both gynaecology textbooks and popular handbooks written by doctors or by journalists using medical authority. I had found this an instructive study, because it was possible to identify quite clearly the sets of ideas being promoted, and this made it possible to see better how women's own accounts of their experiences are constructed, and how they can be altered. It has been

possible, for instance, to see very clearly the way in which doctors blame mothers for their daughters' problems. To say this is not to deny the fact that many women themselves blame their mothers for their problems - it does however open up the question of the reasons for this, beyond individual psychologies.

Using textbooks does not produce any kind of complete picture of medical thought. Like everyone else, what doctors say and what they do may be entirely different things. Textbooks are not even as crucial to the teaching of medicine as they are to other professions, for it is very much an empirically based practice. To produce a fuller picture of the situation one would, at least, have to ask doctors what they do, and observe what they appear to do and say in several sites, as well as studying a variety of different texts including lectures and journals.

But my research is not exclusively focused upon medical accounts, so I chose to confine my investigation of medical thought to the written word. I examined six text-books in detail, those which the Librarian of the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology said were the most commonly used texts (see Chapter 9 for more details). I cross-checked this with the availability and level of use of textbooks in my local medical library. I felt that these texts together constitute a reasonable source for what might be called the established belief of the profession. Most of them had been through numerous

editions, and all had been revised in recent years, so that process of slow change would seem to ensure a fair level of general acceptance of the ideas put forward among at least some sections of the medical profession. Given the ponderous production process, it seems likely also that such texts would tend to be on the conservative end of the spectrum of opinion on any given topic. I therefore searched for recent articles in medical journals on relevant subjects and read these as supplementary evidence.

3.1.5 History

I had hoped to be able to use historical sources to get some better sense of how this present society's particular ways of dealing with menstruation had come about. The problem is in part the same as the one I found with anthropology: that those who have written history have mostly been men and have not taken much note of matters like menstruation; also that the cultures of the past seem to have discouraged mention of menstruation quite as strongly as ours does today.

I have mentioned snippets of historical evidence which I have been able to come up with where they are relevant to points I discuss throughout this thesis. There is much more historical work which could be done, and which I regret I have been unable to do.

The surrounding research which would enable one to go

further on specific aspects of menstruation is only recently being done. In the last few years, historical work on gynaecology in Britain: Audrey Eccles on Tudor and Stuart England (1982); Hilda Smith (1976) and Patricia Crawford (1981) on the seventeenth century; and Ornella Moscucci (1982;1984) on the more recent history, have added detailed information to the American sources, eg Barker-Benfield (1975) and Ehrenreich and English (1978). The Victorian era has been better researched, especially the uses made of menstruation by both sides in the argument over women's education: Showalter and Showalter (1972), Bullough and Voght (1973), Carroll Smith-Rosenburg (1974).

My reading turned up some interesting mentions of menstruation within studies of the lives of working class women earlier in this century and in the late nineteenth century. Both the report (prefaced by Bondfield 1943) Our Towns. and Elizabeth Roberts' work (1984), say that many working class women did not expect or particularly want to wear any sanitary protection. Jill Liddington's research (1984) discovered a belief among Lancashire cotton workers that the smell of menstrual blood on women's clothes would be sexually arousing to men.

Without doubt feminist historical research will continue to shed light on these matters, to raise questions which masculinist historians have failed to address. One would need a good deal of information about the surrounding cultural beliefs, however, to make any sense of isolated

statements like these about menstruation.

I have begun to think, also, that a careful and comprehensive study of literary sources by women: novels, plays, poetry, diaries and so forth, might yield more reference to menstruation than one might expect. Many modern feminist writers refer to menstruation, especially to the experience of the first period (eg Alther 1977; Morrison 1970; Walker 1982). But it is also mentioned in novels of the early 1960s like Paule Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones (1960) and Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook (1962). I have read too little literature of earlier times to say whether or not women wrote about it earlier too - but it seems to me quite likely that the assumption that they would not have done may be mistaken. As the present wave of feminism encourages the re-publication of more and more women's writing, especially from the nineteenth century, we will be in a better position to judge on this.

What other sources of evidence could I turn to on present day attitudes? The material advertising sanitary wear and the 'educational' literature produced by the companies which manufacture it have been analysed by sociologists (Slavin 1981; Whisnant and Zegans 1975). There is not a great deal else written about menstruation in our culture.

3.1.6 Interviewing Men?

I was somewhat blocked on this question when I attended a

seminar on patriarchal relations and the research process given by Sue Scott, where she reflected on the ways in which the social relations involved in the doing of research affect what research gets done. She has subsequently written up and expanded that talk (1983; 1984). She discussed particularly the way that qualitative methods 'fit' with femininity and raised questions about the assumption that such methods also unproblematically 'fit' with feminism. In her research on postgraduate students Scott had interviewed a number of powerful men (their supervisors), and noted the ways in which the different statuses of her interviewees vis a vis herself affected the research results. She also pointed out how little feminist research is done involving interviewing men.

This was really the first time I considered interviewing men about menstruation: it had crossed my mind more than once before, but I had immediately dismissed it as absurd, unthinkable. I realised that I hadn't taken the idea seriously, not because I thought it an unintersting research idea, but because of my assumptions about the social situation I would be creating for myself. I wrote at the time that:

> "I would actually feel quite threatened, afraid, sitting in a room with a man asking questions about his views on my body. There's also an element of not wanting the truth spelt out to me... But it is surely illuminating that I myself am so willing to speak with women about it but can barely contemplate speaking to

men." (Journal, 16.2.82)

I kept careful notes from then on in my research journal about my feelings about the process of contacting and interviewing the men and of working on the tapes, and have tried to use some of these observations as data. I was consciously doing something which in certain ways disrupted 'normal' social life in talking to strange men about periods, and wanted to use the experience as fully as possible. This attempt to be self-reflectively aware of the research process produces a certain disruption of the conventional way of writing about research. Therefore I will discuss my feelings about the interviews more within the chapters on men's view on menstruation, and will here confine myself to points which might be of general interest about my experience of interviewing men.

I should emphasise here, though, that I never conceived my research on men as an exercise in presenting an accurate picture of the states of mind of British manhood on the subject. What I wanted was suggestive evidence, some material from which hypotheses could be generated. I did not have a wide range of choice about which men to interview, since the social situation of my approaching men about menstruation in some random way would indeed have been intolerably absurd and embarrassing for all concerned. I considered attempting to reach men in some way through women, but felt that any such approach would problematise women and the heterosexual relationship in an inappropriate

way. I wanted individual men as specimens of the group 'men', not as half of heterosexual couples.

Therefore I was obliged to use as my population the network of social and political contacts which is constituted of people with some understanding of feminism and the notion of sexual politics. There are positive reasons for using men from this milieu as well as the negative one of lack of choice (one could after all decide that the project would not be worth doing if one's only possible sample seemed totally unsatisfactory). Much of the discourse on menstruation, and indeed around issues of sexuality generally, expresses the idea that young, 'progressive' people have much 'better' attitudes about these things than 'traditional' people. By focusing on men from what is seen as the most liberal sector of the population, it is possible to look at the limits of this liberalism, and to shed light on that discourse.

I interviewed fourteen men, aged between 21 and 40. All were white and non-Jewish, all English except for one Irishman. Two were fathers, and one identified as homosexual, although others mentioned homosexual experiences. About half of the men described themselves as coming from working class families, half middle class; the majority now defined themselves as middle class. The sample was gathered partly in snowball fashion, through friends of friends, and partly through sending a letter to an evening class on 'sexual politics for men', asking for

volunteers. Only one of the men, however, was someone I knew socially at all.

I interviewed most of the men in their own homes, and the remaining two in an office at the university. The interviews were semi-structured, following a kind of life-history format, and all were taped and then transcribed in full. They varied in length between half an hour and nearly two hours.

It soon became clear to me that the issue of who can say what to whom are critical to the social existence of menstruation in our culture, and I was concerned about the limitations of my being in control of the interviews. There were problems, I felt, both with the fact that I set the agenda, and with the fact that since I was doing the interviewing, the men could only say things they were willing to say to a woman.

I did not have the resources to pay a male interviewer, and had no co-operative volunteer to hand. The compromise I came up with was to ask a 'men's group' to tape a discussion about menstruation for me. It is not easy to define a men's group (cf Bradshaw 1982). They have grown up since the early 1970s among men who have been affected or influenced by feminist ideas. Some have called themselves 'men's liberation' groups, others 'men against sexism' groups - this particular one had not taken up either of these definitions.

Within the group, the men would know, therefore, that a woman would be listening to their tape, but I would not be present at the discussion, so that it could not be focused on me. The group asked me to give them a list of questions to help them to start the discussion, and I sent them a list covering the same kinds of topics as my individual interviews did: however once they got started the group did not stick at all closely to my questions. I felt that the group did in fact provide a very useful check and in a sense a commentary on my interviews. For example the group returned three times to the topic of the smell of menstrual blood, something which was not mentioned once in the interviews.

More empirical work, including more men and more settings, male interviewers, repeated interviews, group discussions of different kinds, could undoubtedly yield more information about the subjects I have investigated. Watching what happens to other researchers, I was afraid of 'drowning in data', so I limited each part of my empirical work quite strictly to what I thought I could handle.

1.3.7 The VAT Campaign

The idea for the other major piece of empirical work which I carried out, like the idea of interviewing men, came to me late on in the proceedings. I had known about the existence of a campaign against the taxation of sanitary wear since I began my research, but it took a news item about the campaign delivering a petition for it to occur

to me that the campaigners might be useful informants. One thing which opened my mind to doing this was that in my interviews with men I was beginning to see a clear separation in what the men tended to find acceptable in public and what in private. I was also developing a fuller vision of the politics around who may say what about menstruation in which settings. It came to me then that the women involved in this campaign had put themselves in an exceptional situation by voluntarily and publicly raising an issue related to menstruation. I predicted, accurately as it turned out, that they would have stories to tell about how men in public life in Britain today react to mention of periods in public places. Again, I will say more about my experience of researching the campaign when I write about that part of the research.

I stumbled upon a very interesting source of data in the course of my interview with Denise Flowers, who co-ordinates the campaign. She had received a great number of letters, many of them routine, but among them were a smaller number of letters in which women had expressed their feelings about the tax on sanitary wear and often about menstruation more generally. I found that these letters gave a very interesting additional perspective on the issues, and I present extracts from then in an appendix. As an example of data 'on women', I think these letters make an interesting contrast with interviews with women - they represent unheard views of women, views for which the women themselves have put some energy into trying

to get them heard. They are of course from a self-selected sample of women, but from what one can tell it is a remarkably broad one on many of the usual sociological parameters.

The information which Denise gave me about men's reactions to the campaign formed a very useful further data-set on male views to place beside my interview material and the medical sources.

I have wanted to include the material in the Appendix, the voices of women raised in protest, because they seem to me to form a unity with the data on men. Although the male point of view is my central focus, it seemed wrong to exclude from the picture the female resistance which is everywhere the concommitant of male power.

I have tried so far to give a more or less chronological account of how I decided to do what I did. To conclude this discussion of the methodology of my study I would like to reflect more generally and with hindsight on the methods I finally used.

3.1.8 Triangulation

One major positive point I would emphasise about the methods I used is that the multiplicity of methods used and of data sources has been very useful. It was Denzin's advocacy of the notion of 'triangulation' (eg Denzin 1970)

which gave me the confidence to dispense with the large scale survey model. I found the spatial analogy, the idea of looking at a problem from as many angles as possible rather than trying to perfect the reliability of one's presentation of a single angle, most helpful. A similar approach is also advocated in Stacey (1969), using the notion of 'combined operations'.

As I have said, avoiding 'bias' is impossible, and I do not imagine that sociology can arrive at ultimate truths. Denzin's words sum up my view:

> "Sociology's empirical reality is a reality of competing definitions, attitudes, and personal values. As such, it is a social object in the symbolic environment of the scientist. Any attempt to approximate knowledge of this object must acknowledge this fact. The act of doing research is an act of symbolic interaction. Each sociological method and, in fact, each sociologist generates different lines of action towards this object. Thus, complete agreement between methods and their users can never be expected. But there are rules of method that govern the sociologist's conduct. His actions - from the use of methods, to the personal values that shape the sociological act - must be made public." (1970:300)

(I must quarrel, in passing, with Denzin's use of the falsely universal male pronoun which betrays his assumptions about the gender of 'the sociologist'.)

Denzin also stresses the importance of attempting to locate the settings within which one's informants have learnt or use the ideas or information they describe. In interviewing men I found it quite natural, to them as well as to me, to describe different ideas and feelings as they related, for instance, to all-male settings, or to discussions with women. Triangulation seems to me to be a very important notion for any study with a subject as broad as mine.

3.2 STUDYING MEN - ETHICS, EMPATHY AND POWER

My final decision to focus my study on men has on the whole seemed to me to be a good one. However there are real problems with this, which I would not wish to minimise. The first of these is the personal cost to the researcher. I have often found my research a painful process, for I have had to make myself pay attention to men's sexist views of myself in a way which I would 'naturally' avoid in any other situation. Here I am referring to reading as much as to interviewing or transcribing. I did find I experienced a particular kind of distress in transcribing my tapes, as I felt at once used as a secretary, and responsible for the existence of the words I was dealing with. With sources already in print one at least need not feel that one is in any way in danger of colluding by discussing their contents.

It is difficult to evaluate one person's pain against the use her work might be to herself and to others in terms of understanding women's situation. That judgement will in any case have to wait until I have published the results of my research. Certainly the experience which restored my faith that my work on men's views was worthwhile was of reading a paper from it to a group mainly composed of women, and finding that the women responded very strongly with stories of their own - it led them to reanalyse their views. That response also made me feel less isolated and personally oppressed by my data, for other women were angered by it too.

There are no directly comparable studies I can turn to in attempting to evaluate my own. A few studies have been done by feminists on men in recent years. One which springs to mind is that by Stanley and Wise, on obscene phone calls (1979). But they did not go into this study by choice - they began studying the calls in self-defence, as a way of dealing with the experience of receiving them as a result of their work for a lesbian support phoneline.

Even the recent special issue of the Women's Studies International Forum edited by Sue Wise and Liz Stanley devoted to "Men and Sex: a case study in sexual sexual politics" (1984) contains only one account of research involving interviewing, and that was of men as part of heterosexual couples.

O'Brien and McKee (1982) have written about interviewing men,

drawing on their work in studies of fatherhood. They raise many important issues: the way in which men manipulated the interview situation; their sense that men at times spoke more easily to them when they had put them in a wife-like role; the ways in which the issue of sex arose in certain interviews. They tell of a number of occasions when they felt threatened by an interviewee, or felt that he was using masculine behaviours to assert dominance. A number of the 'lone fathers' (one of the samples) used the interview to rail against their wives and women in general, which made the interviewers very uneasy.

But while O'Brien and McKee point out many problems they experienced, I found their account oddly unhelpful. They do not openly put themselves in the centre of their account, and this makes reading off any analysis very problematic. For instance they describe their experiences and reactions in the passive voice:

> "This was a feeling (that she was sexual prey) that never left the researcher and although he never 'pounced' it was always suspected that he might." (p.13)

And their account of the problem they are discussing again covers over the question of power, of who may be doing what to whom:

> "we cite one example in more detail to show how the boundaries between women as 'scientific observer', confidant, and sexual being are sometimes finely negotiated and often conflated." (p.14)

Because they do not want to see their own interests as women as in any way conflicting with those of their interviewees, they describe only how the men's behaviour affected their own overt, 'observable' behaviour, for instance they refer to:

> "the style of interaction where the female interviewer found herself acting in a way that avoided reciprocal or direct confrontation with the rather aggressive male interviewee." (p.4)

But at no point do they let us inside their skins, to learn about how the whole process made them feel, or what it made them think about gender, fathers, the research.

From their account, O'Brien and McKee suffered much more abuse during their research than I did doing mine, but because they avoid confronting this experience head on, their account left me in the dark as to how to think about my own work.

Related to this there was, I felt, a problem about my ability to understand what the men were saying. As Jane Rosser pointed out to me, there are two kinds of understanding involved here: an understanding as a woman, what you might call 'getting the message' which often led me into a reaction of anger or despair, and also an understanding <u>with</u> the men, of what their words meant to them. The difficulty was that I had in a sense to overcome my hearing of 'the message' in order to understand in any other way - that is, to 'make sense' of what they said.

Certainly I found that I understood and indeed heard very little of what was said in my interviews and the group discussion the first time I heard it. It was absolutely essential to have them on tape so that I could read and reread the transcripts, and so that I could benefit from other people's comments on them. Interpretation has not been a straightforward task.

I spent a long time engaged in a struggle to organise my interview data into some coherent form. As will become clear, I ended up solving my problem by borrowing a kind of structure from Esther Merves' thesis (1983) which laid out some women's views of menstruation in a systematic way. One of my problems was I think that having interviewed men, I was perversely reluctant to let them set the agenda. I could not, in any case, free myself sufficiently from my own preconceptions to produce a coherent description of the men's point of view.

This experience has made me very aware of how much sociologists generally depend upon empathy with their research subjects in making their interpretations. A great many studies are done on groups of people the researcher initially feels some empathy with, and in other cases, researchers describe the speedy development of such empathy (Geer 1964, quoted in Denzin 1970). 'Going native' a is recognised research problem, but what is rarely noted is the utter dependency of all research upon some kind of fellow-feeling. If social reality is indeed a matter of

shared meaning, what happens when the researcher does not and cannot afford to share meaning with the researched? Let me make it clear that I am not here talking about the interview situation: it is relatively easy for a person with average social skills to simulate rapport with a wide range of other people for the duration of a sociological interview. The problem is one of interpreting the words of someone whose social location is in some way alien to one's own.

I think that the fact that I was in the less powerful social group in this case made me clearly aware of this. A researcher trying to interpret the words of an underclass from a position of relative power may on the one hand be more able to fabricate some kind of empathy for them - on the other hand it may just be easier to delude oneself about the insight one has developed when the researched are less likely to answer back. This leads us to my next point.

It is also a frequent feature of sociological studies that their subjects are less socially powerful than the researcher. The difference may only be one of level of education, and the status only that which attaches in the research situation to whoever is asking the questions - but these are real differences nonetheless. Of course one cannot weigh up one kind of social hierarchy against another in any general sense - to establish, for example, in my own interviews, which of my interviewees were or were not more powerful than me. But on the relevant variable of

gender they were all of the powerful group and this placed me in what I think was an unusual position.

The effect was that I was aware of the interviewing and the research process generally as a power struggle in a way that most researchers seem not to be. Perhaps I mean more exactly that I was aware of the need in myself to exert what power I could over my subjects. I wrote after transcribing the men's group discussion that I felt upset and angry, "ground down" by the process: "I have to somehow reduce them to 'data', use them for my own ends" (journal 8.4.83).

The aggression in this statement runs totally counter to most of what has been written on feminist research. A large part of this discourse of the last few years has concerned research ethics, and has been aimed at democratising the research process, seeing 'normal' research as exploitative. Sometimes the actual proposals have been minimal, for instance that researchers should confess to having answered their interviewees' questions (Oakley 1981), but other writers have seemed to be proposing a more radical form of powersharing with those researched.

The problem here is that writers tend to generalise from particular experiences, in this case that of a feminist researcher interviewing women. General positions on the ethics of research are then constructed, losing sight of

the very particular politics of the specific research in question.

It remains an open question in my mind what ethics a feminist researcher should follow in dealing with men. I would not engage in deception, but more because to do so would I think put the researcher in a false position as an analyst and because of the practical difficulties involved than because I think women can necessarily be expected to operate with honour in a man's world (Rich 1980). I have stuck closely to the contract I made with each of my interviewees and with the group. They voluntarily agreed to be interviewed, and I agreed to protect their identities. I do not feel that I owe them anything more, and have not given them privileged access to my research results. I did not wish to engage further with them and their views on my analysis.

At one point an interesting conflict arose between myself and my supervisory committee over matters related to this problem. After transcribing the men's group tape, I felt there were many questions I would still have liked to ask the group, to clarify their statements. I proposed the idea of sending them another set of written questions and asking them to tape another discussion. The three women on my supervisory committee all felt this would be wrong, though their reasons differed somewhat. Essentially it was felt that this would be asking too much, that if I wanted more of them I would have to go to the group myself, to

give something back. One specific point was that I wanted to ask them questions about men generally, rather than about their personal feelings, as some of the most useful data from the individual interviews concerned this. To do this, I was told, would be to distort the purpose of their group.

My own feeling about this was that the men were free to refuse to help me further - I had no power to oblige them to do anything, so there could be no harm in asking. My supervisors were putting it to me that what I wished to do in some way violated normal professional practice and could endanger the reputation of my department/the profession generally. The two sets of power relations came into direct conflict: men/women and researcher/researched. A further layer of conflict involved the different views I and the other women had of the meaning of each of these power inequalities, and of their relative weight. I recount these problems because I felt at that point how acutely difficult it was to make decisions about the ethics of how one uses men as informants in the absence of a body of work, of prior experience, on the subject.

I experienced problems over ethics also in the other part of my work that concerned specific individuals, my study of the campaign against VAT on sanitary wear. Here I had many precedents to refer to, and when I first approached Denise Flowers I wrote to her that I was aware of the problems involved in academic research on political groups and

wanted to discuss this with her.

There have been heated debates within the women's liberation movement in which academics have been charged with exploiting the ideas and energy of the movement for personal academic gain (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group 1979). This is a complex issue, but I think that these are very real concerns. While we may wish to believe that an academic's writing can further 'the cause' in itself, research cannot by any means be assumed to be a liberatory process for those involved.

I spent most of a day at Denise's house, and felt that she put a great deal of time and energy into helping me. I feel a strong sense of obligation to her. What we agreed was that I would write an article for a popular women's magazine to try to help the campaign to get publicity, as a sort of exchange for information for my thesis. I also sent Denise copies of what I have written about her, and we have kept up a friendly correspondence ever since. Like other feminist researchers, I found it startlingly easy to establish rapport with Denise despite considerable differences of class and lifestyle, and she continues to feel that I 'understand' about her campaign work in a specal way.

It is interesting that the article I wrote was rejected by three magazines that I submitted it to - an experience in keeping with the campaign's general reception. My attempt

to use my skill on behalf of the campaign has not made a great deal of difference! Again we have the two power parameters: whatever writing skills and professional status I may (or may not!) have are weighed against my status as a woman raising an 'unpopular' issue.

I contrast these two experiences here to emphasise that basically my ethics in the research situation derive from my political principles and not from any abstract or general ideas about research ethics. I cannot treat all people indifferently, 'without prejudice', when what I am dealing in is sexual politics. I make no apology for this as I believe that what I have done is precisely what all researchers do.

The very notion of the need for special professional ethics enshrines the idea that the particular social status of the professional creates specific ethical problems. It is all about power, and my view is that the only way to guard against the abuse of power is to be as fully conscious as possible of all the relevant power dynamics in any given situation. Having said that, I continue to feel that my behaviour is vulnerable to criticism, precisely because my analysis of the power relations involved is not that which is generally accepted in this culture.

3.2.1 Self Revelation and Social Status

This brings me to another neglected methodological issue:

the effect on methods used of the researcher's particular social location (but cf Stacey 1969). I came to consider this question originally through the observation that while ethnomethodology would seem to be in many ways a philosophy and practice well suited to feminism it seems mainly to be practiced by white middle- and upper-class men. (There are some exceptions to this rule; Smith 1974, 1978, Stanley and Wise 1983, and perhaps my observation is already out of date). I have been offered one explanation for this in the terms of the sociology of sociology, that it is a "boy's club". But I would like to offer another kind of view, from my own experience of this research.

From time to time, as will be clear from this thesis, I have attempted to insert into my accounts of my research some self-reflective observations about my own experience of the research. Each time I have done this my reactions have been challenged, the accuracy of my perceptions questioned. Stanley and Wise (1979) describe a similar experience. Now this should be normal practice, and in a sense it is the reason for revealing one's subjectivity in this way - precisely to make it open to criticism. But each time it occurred I felt intensely personally undermined. I wrote during one incident where I had described my feelings about my data and had felt my views to be denied:

> "My feelings about the particular men are a priori invalid, because my general view of men is radically in contradiction to that of the culture. It is

> against commonsense to be upset when men express into my ear the things the culture and other men have taught them to think and feel about my body. The fact we have come up against is that although in my own way I am an extremely rational person, in the great scheme of things I am as mad as any madwoman in any attic" (journal 19.7.83).

What becomes clear is that revealing one's personal feelings as part of the research project is a different matter when one is of the group whose perspective constitutes the accepted social view, from when one's perspective is in any sense deviant. My view is seen as an opinion, and a questionable one, while a white middle class man's is much more likely to be taken for granted as reflecting how a person <u>would</u> feel in such and such a situation.

Thus self revelation for a lesbian radical feminist makes her vulnerable in a special way - she knows that her reality is not shared by the whole society, but in describing it openly <u>as</u> her personal perspective she opens herself to attack on who she is as much as on what she thinks. The oppressed, I would argue, are always, 'naturally' self-reflective in the sense that they are necessarily aware that their particular view <u>is</u> a particular view and not a universal one. Much less can ever be 'taken for granted'.

Perhaps this explains why ethnomethodology has not appealed especially to oppressed people. It takes tremendous confidence to reveal one's own perceptions as individual perceptions, and it is hardly surprising that women have tended rather to want to make universalistic claims. In a sense it is one of the things that women must fight for, that women's points of view should be accepted as real, not always marginalised as 'the woman's angle'.

Certainly it explains something of the compromise which will be apparent in the methodology of my own study. I have tried to be self-reflective but have at the same time wanted to make claims for my analysis which inevitably go beyond describing it simply as one woman's view.

The stress I have felt upon my own participation in this research derives partly from the fact that I cannot fall back on the testimony of a group of other women for support. I think it possible that my study will be imbalanced against women's perspective, in a sense. I have referred to women's experience in a number of ways - from the VAT letters, from Esther Merves's research, from anecdotes women have told me. However the picture I present of the society will inevitably emphasise men's power and men's ideas more than women's power and resistance. I have allowed this to occur because I trust that my study is only part of the process and that women will use the information I have gathered and the ideas I offer in asserting their power and consolidating their resistance.

Department of Sociology

SOCIAL MEANINGS OF MENSTRUATION:

A FEMINIST INVESTIGATION

By:

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THREE VOLUMES: VOLUME 2

HOW MEN SEE MENSTRUATION

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CHAPTER 4

COMPARING MEN'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS MENSTRUATION WITH WOMEN'S

The task of analysing the data I have collected from men on their attitudes towards and feelings about menstruation presented me with many problems, not least among them being the difficulty of seeing any structure within the data which could usefully organise what might be called 'a male view of menstruation'. It has also been difficult at times to see what status I can give to data from individual men in relation to men as a social group. I have used my data in a number of different ways in different parts of this thesis.

Firstly I have used my interviewees as informants on men in general - I ask them to describe 'their culture' as an ethnographer might for any culture with which she is unfamiliar. This information forms the bulk of Chapter 6, on male culture. Secondly I look at my experience of taping and processing the interviews and dealing with the group discussion tape, concentrating on them as social events in themselves rather than on their contents. This material appears throughout the thesis as well as in the methodology chapter. Thirdly I have attempted to use my sample as specimens of mankind to test out some theories which make claims about <u>all</u> men: Chapter 7 on the place of reproduction in men's consciousness is an example of this

approach. Fourthly I use them to report on women's silences - much of my material on etiquette is derived from this method. Finally I have at all times tried to retain the connection between the ideas men express and their awareness of where they learnt such ideas and in what social contexts they might more 'naturally' exist.

In this chapter I shall impose a structure, a set of themes, upon some parts of the data by comparing it with the rich data generated by a study of women's attitudes, carried out by Esther Merves in 1982, in Ohio, USA. To put this exercise in context, I will first look at previous research attempts to compare men's and women's attitudes in this area, and will point out some of the methodological problems this involves.

4.1 COMPARING WOMEN AND MEN: PREVIOUS RESEARCH

4.1.1 American and Canadian Surveys

Since the mid '70s, there have been several studies which directly compare female to male attitudes, using exactly or nearly equivalent questions and procedures to measure the attitudes of each sex. The earliest formal experiment to test male attitudes to menstruation which I have come across was carried out, interestingly, as part of a study aimed at criticising the way in which psychologists were conducting experiments on women relating to menstrual symptoms.

Mary Brown Parlee (1974) argued that Moos' Menstrual Distress Questionnaire (1968) was measuring stereotypic beliefs about menstruation rather than women's actual experience, as was being claimed. She replicated Moos' procedure, but gave questionnaires to 34 males as well as 25 females. She found that the men (stating what they thought women experienced) reported identical symptom patterns over the cycle to the women. The males actually attributed greater symptom severity to women than women did themselves on three of the subscales during the premenstrual period and on all the six subscales during the menstrual phase. Parlee argued that men, having less access to falsifying information, were likely to express stereotypical cultural beliefs more strongly than women did - and also that these were formulated so as to justify existing social arrangements.

Brooks-Gunn and Ruble (1980), studying attitudes among college women and men, and adolescent girls, found similarly, that males tended to rate menstruation as more debilitating and bothersome, while females rated it as not debilitating, not overly disruptive, and only slightly bothersome.

Richman, Patty and Fisher (1976) who conducted another questionnaire survey of US undergraduates, found, more strongly still, that male perceptions were the opposite to female ones. Males were more likely to view it as a disruption, whereas females viewed it as a normal part of

life.

Rina Grafstein (1981) asked her questions of 67 male and 103 female undergraduate psychology students in Toronto, Canada. She invented her own instrument, offering general attitudes such as "During menstruation women are unclean" to be agreed or disagreed with. Half the items on her list gave positive aspects of menstruation, unlike most instruments previously used. She found that "on the whole, the men... held more negative or maladaptive menstrual attitudes relate to sexuality than did the women." They were "clearly more prohibitive of sexual encounters during menstruation". Grafstein found that men also scored significantly lower on a scale designed to reflect the subject's level of factual information on menstruation. "Males again were generally unaware of the actual effects of menstruation and exaggerated the physical discomfort accompanying the menstrual flow." Every man she questioned felt that he needed more access to information on menstruation.

Grafstein concludes that "the Menstrual Attitude Inventory was highly sensitive to the effects of sex". She echoes Parlee's interpretations of this finding, and also argues that if men were better informed, their attitudes would improve. However she gives a quotation from one of the smaller sample she interviewed at length, which I think tends to indicate that this idea (that the problem is lack of information) is too simple:

> "I know only the basis mechanics of how women's bodies work... I've known more, I've been told more, I've read more, and I don't remember. It doesn't relate to me."

Another problem with these studies is that they take for granted some notion of 'a good attitude' to menstruation - something which seems to me to be highly problematic.

Another study of college students, 50 male and 50 female, was carried out in the same year by Sharon Golub in the USA. Again, she found the males "less knowledgeable" than the females, and that they attributed worse symptoms to women than the women did themselves. One striking difference in attitude she found was about whether or not menstruation affects a woman's thinking processes: 75% of males and only 32% of females believed that it did. Asked whether they believed that menstrual pain has a psychological basis, 52% of males agreed and 27% of females.

But looking at some of the questions Golub asked, we begin to see problems with this approach. One question is: "Do you think menstruation is painful?" This seems to me highly ambiguous, especially from the woman's point of view. Whose menstruation does this refer to? Or might it means does menstruation necessarily have to be painful? Similar problems arise with another question: "Do you think that the average monthly menstrual discharge exceeds one

half-cup?" For people are surely responding from two sources of knowledge - general beliefs drawn from the culture, and personal experience (itself of course culturally interpreted). The women have direct access to physical experience of menstruation - their own at the very least. The men have less (especially given that Golub's typical respondent is 20 years old, single and Catholic) - but still may know something of specific women's experiences. Ideas from these two sources may conflict.

Golub's questions on sexual behaviour are problematic in other ways. She has attempted to ask symmetrical questions to each sex. But since the relations between the sexes in the social world are not symmetrical, the results read rather oddly. For example:

> Do you make fewer sexual advances toward a menstruating women?
>
> Do you avoid sexual advances when you are menstruating?
>
> Are you as attracted to and aroused by a menstruating woman?
>
> Are you as attracted to and aroused by a man when menstruating?

The kind of questions asked, to me, reveal more problems than they solve. The assumptions made about sexual behaviour are nowhere made explicit, so that clearly different questions are asked of each sex <u>as if</u> these questions meant the same in each case.

The finding that 86% of the men and only 46% of the women "would have sexual intercourse during menstruation" is typical of the general pattern of response. But what does it mean? And the finding that 38% of women are less affectionate when menstruating, while only 9% of men are less affectionate with menstruating women - are we to take this as some sort of natural fact, or can it be taken as an indication that women, to avoid embarrassment, dare not initiate affectionate behaviour in case it led to sexual intercourse which they might not want?

This is an area where yes/no responses make little sense. People's 'attitudes' are no more straightforward than is the body of 'fact' which is taken for granted beneath these 'attitude' questions. In places, Grafstein's and Golub's findings contradict one another. We could perhaps seek the reason for this in the composition of their different survey populations. But it seems to me more likely that the reason is more that women and men hold contradictory attitudes about menstruation; that, in an area like this, if questions are asked in slightly different ways, responses will differ.

4.1.2 British 15 Year Olds

Only one study has looked at males' views of menstruation in Britain: Prendergast, Davies and Prout (1982). From a health education perspective, these researchers looked at 15 year olds' knowledge about menstruation (25 female and

25 male). They assessed general knowledge of the menstrual cycle, of menstrual discomfort, of treatments for discomfort, and about the social implications of menstruation - each on a five point scale from less than minimal knowledge to very deep.

On every scale, their findings were significantly different for boys than for girls. The category "less than minimal" never contained any girls, although as many as 29% of the whole group were at that level in relation to treatments for discomfort. And at the top end of the scale, only girls occupy the highest category (though this never reaches "very deep") in all except the case of the first, very general question. Here, 8% of boys and 10% of girls could give some account of hormonal action as the causal element in the menstrual cycle.

As the authors see it, this study effectively shows how very ignorant this sample is generally, and how much more ignorant the boys are than the girls. But surely it is strange to be asking questions as if boys and girls might respond similarly, when a girl of fifteen might have several years' personal experience of the matter behind her? No attempt is reported to have been made to discover how anyone concerned had learnt what they knew.

There is also, again, the problem of taking the idea of 'information' for granted. Prendergast et al mention that among the boys consigned to the "less than minimal"

category on the "treatments" question are some who believe that "It will go away if you don't take any notice." (p.9) The authors categorise such an attitude as a piece of ignorance. I would suggest that it could just as well be seen as an item of information, since it is an idea which is expressed in several respected gynaecology textbooks.

To give a further example, a boy responds to the "social implications" question with the following:

> "It doesn't necessarily make any difference, it's all part of molly-coddling girls. They are equal now."

This statement is also put under "less than minimal", as an "inadequate" response, but again it is not an uncommon attitude in our society. One is forced to wonder - should any ideas, however contradictory and unhelpful, simply be written off in this way?

The discussion by the authors of their data makes it clear that they did in fact expect more knowledge of the girls - as one would. Could not their mode of investigation have taken this expectation as a starting point, and have been made more sensitive to the structurally different perspectives of females and males?

This method of examining attitudes seems to fix the respondents in a passive role - containers of information which has been fed to them, almost. is room only on the sidelines of the enquiry for pieces of information relating to the way in which those studied use their

'knowledge'. The researchers remark, for example, that

> "Many girl students complained about the teasing and unpleasant mocking behaviour of some boys they knew, but, perhaps more seriously, there were indications that teachers themselves did not always respond appropriately." (p.13)

This teasing appears to be a feature of school life in many mixed-sex schools, though not all. Pat Mahoney (1983) echoes the concern of Prendergast et al in an article on sexist processes of interaction in mixed-sex classrooms. She is a tutor in a teacher-training college:

> "A student's notes revealed that at the end of one of his lessons a girl had hit a boy and refused to give any explanation, so she was given detention. In discussion with the student it emerged that some days later he discovered that when the girl had entered the class the boy had said 'Don't sit over here, you stink', a remark which she had interpreted as part of a whole set of references to the fact that she was known to have begun menstruating. Not only had the student failed to talk the issue through with either of the pupils when he learned what had caused the upset, but my concern seemed to totally enrage him. His final comment after accusing me of being ridiculous and trivial was 'When's Mr .... coming in? I want some help with <u>teaching</u> not all this rubbish'."
>
> "Fear of boys laughter is reported time and time again by students as the reason why girls will not take

central roles in class activities let alone atypical ones." (pp 112)

Data of this sort will tend to be concealed rather than made visible by the practice of treating the sexes alike in carrying out research on subjects relating to sex.

It is however possible in this way to clearly demonstrate that females and males respond differently on these issues - and from the studies I have mentioned certain systematic patterns of difference, for instance where men attribute worse symptoms to women than women themselves, begin to emerge. This is evidence against a theory which sees ideas about menstruation as simply present in the culture, equally pushed at and taken up by both sexes.

But if we wish to go deeper, to look into the contradictions made apparent by these studies, we must approach our research in a different way. While data from two research projects can never be directly comparable unless one at least is designed with this in mind, Esther Merves' work on women and mine on men at least share a broadly compatible approach.

4.2 COMPARING MEN AND WOMEN: MY OWN RESEARCH AND ESTHER MERVES' "THE SOCIAL MANAGEMENT OF MENSTRUATION"

4.2.1 Organising the Data

In analysing my data, I found myself reluctant to present men's perspective on menstruation by itself. Being a woman, I found it very difficult to understand or to analyse the statements men made about menstruation. I discovered that I needed a structure derived from women's point of view in order to approach making sense of my data. Esther Merves' thesis offered such a structure. At another level, given how little the woman's point of view has been articulated on this subject (as on so many others), I found that I could not present male views without feeling that in reproducing them, I added to their definitional power.

To reiterate, briefly, my own position, I have argued that female and male attitudes towards menstruation are not parallel or equivalent to each other; neither can they be seen as complementary, two sides of one coin. I would say, rather, that men and women see menstruation within different terms of reference. It is placed differently within their general views of the world - this is a structural observation, but one which I think is well supported by the data on people's own understandings. Thus we will see that women and men, discussing menstruation, will talk about different issues as well as saying different things - there will be areas of their experience on each side which do not touch directly upon the experience of the other sex. They

will also often define areas superficially common to both of them in different ways.

As individuals, women have physical experience of menstruation, while men do not. To further complicate the issue, men as a social group have power over women as a social group. Here I break with the interactionist approach, for I am presupposing the existence of a structured social relationship. I must stress this here to be clear that I am not merely arguing that female and male experiences should be seen as interacting with one another, but that we must go further and look at the structures of that interaction in political terms. For male definitions become part of what Berger and Luckman call "objective social reality" for women in a way in which female ones do not for men, due to the social power of men as a group.

Merves describes her approach as social-definitionist symbolic-interactionist. She quotes Chafetz (1978), seeing sociology as:

> "the study of human actions to which the individual actors attach subjective meaning and in which the individual takes into account the actions of other humans, whether or not they are present." (p.47)

She hopes to derive her concepts from the empirical world, and "to respect the nature of the empirical world", where "a person can hold diverse attitudes on the basis of differing interaction experience". Her project then, following Blumer (1969) is to explore:

> "the meaning of menstruation as a social object from descriptive accounts from the actors as to how they see the objects, action towards the objects in a variety of different situations, and reference to the objects in their conversations with members of their group." (p.84)

Her approach and mine are therefore compatible in that we both attempt to take as little as possible for granted, to avoid imposing pre-existing ideas onto our data. We are not aiming to produce a single 'truth' about social attitudes towards menstruation.

Merves' sample of women is much larger (60 women) and broader than mine,and is structured into 4 cells, with fifteen women in each cell. Cell 1 contains women aged 21 to 34 not currently married; Cell 2 contains women 21 to 34 currently married; Cell 3, women aged 34 to 50 not currently married; Cell 4 women aged 34 to 50 currently married.

The imposition of these categories, which do not appear to be derived from the women's own views of themselves, stands in something of a contradiction to Merves' social interactionist intentions. However it is Merves' findings rather than her methods which are most useful to us here.

She attempted to include a mixture of women of different religious, political and ethnic backgrounds. She does not

mention any special effort to get a class mix. She built up her sample in snowball fashion, as I did.

My sample of men is narrower in age range, from 21 to 40 only, and is relatively very homogenous in terms of ethnicity, religion and political belief. Because of the topic of enquiry I had little choice as to whom to interview. A survey on the scale of Merves' would have been very difficult to achieve. The men I interviewed tend to come from the ruling sector of the population on every variable except political sympathy.

Though Merves' study is larger, neither of us has attempted to produce a statistically representative study population. In both our cases this has been dictated by the fact that many people would be very embarrassed to be approached with questions on this subject. Thus even if we could allow for the cultural differences between Britain and the USA, I am in no way comparing like to like, for neither study represents its national population to begin with. Without knowing what the significant variables are in relation to attitudes to menstruation, it is not possible to say whether or not it makes any sense to compare US data with British. Therefore we must be aware that any conclusions we might draw from this comparison are very much of an impressionistic sort and should be checked against any other available information. I can prove nothing of what I suggest - the only direct test can be against other peoples' social experiences.

A little support for my interest in men's views comes from Merves' interviewees. She asked her respondents what they would like to see done in the way of further research - they replied as follows:

> "more research on male attitudes, how males learn, and what males know about menstruation; attitudes of doctors; the use of drugs for menstrual problems; medical problems concerning the reproductive organs, including hysterectomies; menarcheal experiences, family dynamics, and embarrassing experiences." (p.168)

4.2.2 Interaction and Conversation about Menstruation

Merves quotes Berger and Luckman's statement that "the subjective reality of something that is never talked about comes to be shakey" (p.149). It is evident from her findings that what is called 'the menstrual taboo' does not mean that it is not spoken of at all. It appears that most women speak of it enough to support their own subjective reality: what is very restricted is where and to whom they may speak about it.

Merves reports that "Respondents from all sampling cells explained that they may communicate to their husbands or significant others and friends that they are menstruating". Some women also tended to communicate this within their families, to a mother or a daughter. Merves found four contexts of communication were mentioned by women in all

cells: communicating cramps or discomfort; as an explanation or excuse for a mood or behaviour; if relevant to sexual behaviour; and in reference to purchasing menstrual products. Married women, in addition, mentioned pregnancy, in the contexts both of wanting to conceive and of not wanting to. Merves writes that "menstruation is not shared as an event in and of itself, but rather as an explanation for discomfort or negative feelings." (p.99)

At other times, menstruation was discussed most frequently with other women, comparing their experiences. A few women had also had extensive conversations with a male friend in which they explained the menstrual cycle to him. Older women said they tended to discuss issues relating to the menopause.

Another way in which conversations relating to menstruation might come up was where someone had asked the woman if she was menstruating. 52% of the study population had been asked this at least once. Here there is a striking difference between the age groups. The figures were: young married, 80%; young unmarried 66.7%; older married 20% and older unmarried 40%. The context, however, was always the same: a common question posed to the younger women was "are you on the rag?" - if married, asked by their husbands. The women said that they were asked this if they "were depressed for no apparent reason" or if they were "bitchy". Merves reports that "often the respondents said they felt insulted. Some respondents qualified this response by

stating that they were being teased or that it was asked jokingly." (p.101)

Before we look at the men's perspective, there is one more set of responses which is important here. Merves asked "Who would you not want to discuss it with?" Only 8 women said no one: 86.7% mentioned someone. In cell 1 a frequent response was "my father". Other answers included: "all males", "adolescent boys", "my boss", "my mother", "authority figure male", "my son", "parents". The most frequent response was "authority figure, strange men or older men" - 31.7%. Others said they would not want to discuss it with "someone who thought it was vulgar, dirty or disgusting" - generally women did not want to confront those males whom they expected to have the most negative attitudes.

Since I did not set out with Merves' structure in mind, I do not have complete data to compare with hers. Certainly those men in my sample who were married or had close sexual relationships with women would generally be aware of their partner's menstruation. Nine men mentioned being aware of their partner's menstrual pain. Eight discussed mood changes relating to the menstrual cycle in relation to specific women they had relationships with. Men also made references to talk about 'premenstrual tension' in other contexts. Certainly where the men were involved in sexual relationships with women, menstruation might come up in a sexual context, though how exactly this would be

communicated was not clear. In my interviews this tended to be discussed in a once-and-for-all sort of way: the issue being whether or not sexual intercourse would take place during the woman's periods. Once the issue is settled, 'managing' menstruation in relation to sex becomes a mundane matter - and one which I suspect the woman deals with.

In terms of discussions of menstruation when the woman is not menstruating, my sample broadly confirms Merves' findings. Most of the men were aware that women spoke more about such matters among themselves. Within families, several men mentioned secrecy between their sisters and their mothers (group p.1; G):

> "I think it was very much my mother looked after that side of it, she took them under her wing, and I mean obviously I don't know how they felt about it, but it was obviously a conspiracy of silence, if you know what I mean, it was totally... it was unmentioned, it was deliberately unmentioned at any time." (J 2)

A few of the women Merves interviewed mention lengthy conversations in which they explained menstruation to men. One man in particular, a homosexual who had very close friendships with women, stands out in my mind as having spoken about such conversations with women. One other had had a number of discussions with his wife. A few men said that they would like to have such conversations, but had not done so.

"L: I keep asking questions on it, but they always manage to avoid them, or put it in such a way that you feel bad about asking any more.

SL: what would you ask... what it felt like?

L: hmm, Like all I know about now, is sort of it's, it happens every four weeks, or every month, you know,... and... but they won't speak any more than that really. It's like, I know it sounds a bit daft, but, there was a box of Tampax outside on the window, it was a pink box, and I'd only seen blue, I asked about them, just like...

SL: And that was quite difficult, was it?

L: Well, I was asking the question, I said 'what's the main difference, like?' and she says, well, didn't say anything really, just left the room and that was it.

SL: Oh dear

L: So all I know is that it was Regular and De Luxe, or something like that. And I'm geting from K (another man) that it's something to do with the chemical in it, the absorbency, but they won't actually talk about the subject.

Most people avoid the subject, so even if you try and find out about it it's difficult." (L 2)

Others make more general statements about how women do not tend to bring up menstruation in other situations:

"D: No I don't remember any women apart from someone that I was maybe in a relationship with, not just someone I was working with, coming up and saying... I

mean, at times I've suspected that that's why they've gone home, or not feeling very well or whatever, but I don't remember anyone ever saying that. It's not something that people openly come out and say, is it ?" (D 4)

A few men also said that they themselves would not initiate a conversation about menstruation with a woman - with the implication that it would be in her interests as much as in theirs that they would not do so:

"I: ...for instance in conversation, I've got lots of friends who are quite open about sexual matters, sexual politics, but still I don't, wouldn't talk to women about it. I certainly wouldn't initiate a conversation about it, I'm sure. (laughs quietly)." (I 6)

"M: ...depending on the circumstances,... would need a bit of warming up to discuss that topic, it wasn't the kind of, walk in, 'how's your period?' kind of discussion (laughs). No I mean it just seems ludicrous to ... And presumably would be quite rightly resented... But also the other side is, I wouldn't initiate a discussion..." (M 11)

This is obviously a complex area, and people may be more or less conscious of their motivations and actions. These men are on the whole presenting themselves as willing or even interested to talk about menstruation. One man, however, reflected that in the past he had prevented a woman he was

involved with from telling him about it:

> "... one woman I've known personally has found it very painful, actually said, this is painful for me. Either other women have not said it, or it's not been as painful for them. And I suppose certainly the first couple of relationships I've had, er, I left it very much to them to get on with it... it was something where I was conscious of the woman saying 'I've started today' or whatever. I would simply go 'oh, sorry' you know, like, 'get on with it, then'... almost, 'tell me when it's over'. That certainly was the first response I remember having to... still very much a private affair... Your know, 'sorry it's happening to you, but you <u>know</u> it's going to happen to you, and nothing you can do about it, so get on with it' I was conscious of that." (Group 10)

I was very struck by reading Merves' central finding about the contexts in which menstruation tends to be discussed, pain, mood change, sex, and in relation to sanitary wear - that it is not usually discussd as a subject in and of itself. This is a good example of the way in which interactionist sociology can bring common-sense knowledge into a place of clearer visibility. Much of the material of this thesis is in fact organised under these same headings.

This is not to say that men's concerns are the same as women's in relation to menstruation, though of course the two are to an extent interdependent. I had found, for

instance, that in reading the 'literature' on menstruation, I had quite lost sight of the importance of menstrual pain, which I had been very interested in when I began my work. But although men pay little attention to the matter, what they do think takes on a greater significance when one realises that this is the context of such a large proportion of female-male interactions, and so much female concern.

In Chapters 7 and 8 I have discussed the question of how important reproduction is to men's understandings of menstruation, and the ways in which men's talk about the subject seems to focus especially on sexuality. Matters relating to sanitary wear come up later in this chapter, in Chapter 6 on male culture, and of course in Chapter 12 and the Appendix, on the campaign against VAT on sanitary wear. Women's and men's individual views on menstrual pain and 'premenstrual tension' are discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, and in the context of medical and broader social constructions of menstrual problems.

4.2.3 Language

It was a study of menstrual euphemisms which first drew my attention to the possibility that men and women actually have two quite separate vocabularies and hence ranges of discourse about menstruation. The first studies of language about menstruation merely collected terms from informants of both sexes and recorded them as 'of' the

culture (Joffe 1948; Boone 1954; Larsen 1963). Virginia L. Ernster (1975)sorted the terms contributed to a folklore archive into those coming from women and those from men, and further enquired into where her informants had learnt the terms they contributed. She found two different sets of terms - the ones men used having "sexual and derogatory connotations". The wider range of terms contributed by women being used partly so that women could tell other women that they were menstruating without any men present realising their meaning, and partly to communicate to male partners with less embarrassment.

Esther Merves reports a range of expressions used by women which essentially replicates earlier work - unfortunately she did not pursue these questions by asking where women had learnt the terms they used. 95% of her sample used the term "period". About a quarter of the women used words from each of three of her categories: negative slang such as "on the rag"; "the curse", etc.; euphemisms such as "that time of the month", "under the weather", "cramps", "George" and the term "menstruate". Finally 8.3% used words descriptive of the bleeding: "flow", "red", "drip".

Euphemisms she found most commonly used by the older married women. Members of the younger married group mentioned special terms they had which they used only to communicate with their husbands - such as: "mother nature"; "visit from George"; "my pee pee".

When I asked men in my sample what words they had heard used for menstruation, they generally volunteered terms they had heard from women. Most of them felt that "period" was the most commonly used term, followed by "that time of the month". Variations on this, adding a negative tinge, are: "wrong time of the month", "her funny time of the month", "bad time of the month". Two mentioned women referring to it as "being on" and another stressed the use of euphemisms:

> "it's more (whispered) 'it's that time of the month, you know, it's the monthlies'. Or even more it's, if someone's been a bit annoyed, or a bit irritable, and you say, 'ooh, what's wrong with her?', they say (whispers) 'you know'... if you're lucky you cotton on straight away so you don't make a fool of yourself. But they usually use safe words, they don't relate to it exactly, nobody likes to say... you have to try and guess what it is if you want to know..." (K 4)

Only two men had heard "the curse" used - this was a term I suggested to several men and which some were rather startled by. One man said "tummy pains" would be used in his home to refer to menstrual pain.

"Menstruate" was mentioned as never being used in ordinary speech (I think Americans use it more), though one man said he and his wife refer to it very clinically as "day 28" - a usage learnt through paying attention to her menstrual cycle while she was trying to conceive. Two other

idiosyncratic usages were mentioned - neither of them, by the way, being used between husband and wife. One man's mother called it "little girls", and a woman friend of another referred to her periods as "giving birth".

Terms learnt from men were usually not mentioned when I asked about euphemisms, but came up when I asked about talk about menstruation in male groups. The majority of terms refer to sanitary towels: "jam rags", "jammy rags"; "jam sandwich", "jam roll", "having the rags up". Various men explained this usage, not all in exactly the same way: one said that terms from men "would have been more derogatory" (M); one called saying "jam rags" "really crude" (D). Another said that at school "the boys used to call, to taunt the girls, we used to say 'where's your jammy rags?'" and that this was "a way of getting at girls" (I). The words might also be used in name-calling among boys - one man explained that it meant "you prat" (Collins Dictionary: an incompetent or ineffectual person).

The only other terms mentioned as used by men were that one man's father called it "women's troubles" if he mentioned it at all (B), and that another recalled a dispute with a female supervisor at work where afterwards another man had consoled him by putting her behaviour down to "the monthlies" (K 3).

When Margaret Stacey read my transcript which included the term "having the rags up", she thought I might have

misheard "hanging the rags up", which she recognised as a phrase from the time when women had literally used to wash out rags and hang them out to dry. This echoes terms that Ernster collected which contain images like red flags.

My data bears out Ernster's findings - the emphasis on sanitary wear in men's talk is very striking. She found that the phrase "on the rag" accounted for 16 out of the 31 expressions contributed by men. Notice that men's language draws attention to the very thing which women put such energy into hiding: the object they see as most discrediting.

The variety of terms which the men in my sample had learnt from women is not very great. The contrast with data from women is striking. Jane Black has informally collected terms from women who attend her women's health classes in Manchester. Her list goes as follows:

> "Has it come?; That time of the month; The friend; Lady in the red dress; I've got a visitor; Monthlies; Are you on?; Unwell/ill; Issue; Jam and bread; Grandma's here; Aunt Susie; The reds are in; Are you seeing red?; Poorly; Curse; Redlight; The red flag's flying; The captain's aboard; Star period; United's playing at home today (a Manchester football reference!). (Lee 1984)

Women explained to Ernster that one purpose of women's terms is to avoid male attention, so it makes sense that many men would not necessarily recognise them.

4.2.4 Sanitary Wear and the Smell of Menstrual Blood

Merves asked her sample of women what needs they had in relation to their menstruation. 32% replied mentioning only sanitary products, and 25% also named medications, warmth, understanding and so on.

> "More married women and older women felt that buying menstrual products was no different than buying non-menstrual products, while 40% of the younger non-married women said that they felt slightly embarrassed about purchasing these products. About the same proportion (22%) in each cell felt that there was a great difference when purchasing menstrual products, except for the older married women, where only 13.3% felt this way. Thus buying menstrual products still represents an embarrassing situation for young women." (pp 112-113)

Abraham's (1983) survey of 40 Australian clerical workers aged 16-35 years found, similarly, that 28% of them said that they "never got embarrassed buying menstrual protection" and that 20% said that they preferred to buy menstrual protection that has been wrapped in plain paper".

We have already heard a good deal about problems around sanitary wear. Before we go any further though, it is important to bear in mind that while no one in Esther Merves' sample mentions money as an issue, there are women in Western societies who cannot afford shop-bought sanitary

towels and who therefore make their own, washable ones. Suzanne Abraham, a gynaecologist, mentions this in relation to Australian women (1983) and Snow and Johnson (1977) warn US doctors to be aware that poor women may be ashamed of not using bought pads or tampons. Women in this situation wrote to Denise Flowers of the Campaign against VAT on Sanitary Wear, (see Appendix). None of the men in my sample mentioned being conscious of women using anything but shop-bought menstrual wear, though they were aware of the shift from pads to internal tampons.

It has become clear, from the experience of the campaign against VAT on sanitary wear, and from the evidence of male slang and reports of boys' jokes, that sanitary wear is one important focus of the male attitude of disgust about menstruation. What references, then, were made to this in my interviews?

Some men, interestingly, mention seeing packets of sanitary wear which were not hidden as being important moments in changing their consciousness about menstruation:

> "it was quite a shock for me in later years to walk into toilets and see packets of tampax and things... before I had any conception, like, of the women's movement... It was a real shock, and then I thought, no point in being shocked..." (E 4)

> "...one of the big surprises of adult life, was going into people's houses and finding things openly

displayed in places. I couldn't believe it, because at home these things had always been hidden away, and it was like a real shock to me, because it was like something that was not mentioned, never spoken about ..." (Group p 3/4)

Another tells of two incidents, one with a girlfriend:

"I: ... I used to see sanitary towels lying around, and I used to tell her to put them away...

SL: oh did you... you thought they shouldn't be...?

I: well, yeah, I don't know, I just didn't want them to be hanging around, lying around..." (I 4)

The other was about a canteen where he worked as a very young man:

"there were about thirty women,... and they did talk about lots of things, in front of each other, which I didn't, I didn't have any... I used to get taunted as well, lots of sexual innuendo... The women used to talk about their periods, they're coming on next week, or... and...

SL: Did you find that embarrassing?

I: Um... yes, because there were so many women together, talking about it and, it was an experience I didn't have, and didn't particularly understand either, really, and I'd usually walk out of the room or walk away from them, try not to listen.

SL: would they be ignoring you, then, or trying to get at you?

I: They weren't particularly ignoring me, they were just talking about it.

SL: What sorts of things would they have said?

I: About running out of STs and things like that, and I once heard two women discussing whether tampons were better than STs and, er, I remember that one because I didn't know the difference between them..." (I 3)

It appears that this man was threatened by the women's failure to pay attention to him, and attempted to change the situation by the only means available to him as a low-status male - removing himself from it.

Notice that in all these cases above, where men report having been shocked by women's behaviour, the women had done nothing actively in order to cause this reaction. What they were doing was failing or refusing to take the trouble to observe the etiquette which the males had come to expect would be observed in regard of themselves as males.

To set beside these stories is the fact that a few men I interviewed mentioned having bought sanitary wear. One saw is as a "breakthrough", and compared it to what he found the greater embarrassment of buying condoms (C). This issue was discussed also in the men's group:

"- Actually have you ever bought a tampax?

- yes

- yes

- it's quite interesting...

- it is

- yes, when I was living with someone, that was the

first time I had to buy them...

- a bit like buying contraceptives, but in a way it's even wierder... obviously not for you

- it is, definitely

- I'm very conscious of making a big play of buying them. I do, I do. You know what you were saying about breaking the taboo about sex, there's something a bit sort of (clicking sound), made it, sort of, you know. Well, whenever I go and buy tampax, it's the same sort of thing, I do the same. I do make a big thing about it, I suppose, I suppose I put them on the side, slam them down (laughter), here, say, how much are they? (background noise)

- the cashiers laughing at you" (Group pp 12/13)

This account reminded me of a woman acquaintance telling me that her father used to insist upon buying sanitary towels for her and her mother, which she believed to be because he enjoyed the embarrassment he could cause to the (female) shop assistants.

There is something strange in the men in the men's group finding buying sanitary wear exciting, when there are a great number of women who have to do it and who are embarrassed. The flouting of convention in this way seems almost to reinforce the convention, by implying that women are just silly to be embarrassed, rather than to transcend it in any way.

Women and men, then, experience unease in relation to

dealing with sanitary wear. But I would argue that the unease each feels is quite different from that of the other sex.

Esther Merves asked her sample of women about the "scent" of menstruation. 18.3% said that it does not have a scent. 35% felt that it did, but could not describe it. The majority of the remaining 46.7% responded that menstruation smells like "blood". Other adjectives included: "heavy, sick, earthy, musty, normal, and sweet". She notes that "Many women prefaced their remarks by saying 'not unpleasant'. Older women were more likely to find the scent unpleasant, younger ones pleasant. Merves found great variation among women's responses, and notes that "the most interesting finding was that an adjective preceeded the response to denote pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neither" (p.112). 25% of the sample found the scent unpleasant.

I did not ask the men I interviewed about the scent of menstruation, nor did I ask if they thought they could tell if a woman was menstruating, although both these lines of enquiry had been suggested to me. These were two of a number of points at which my desire not to hear what the men might say overcame my sociological curiosity.

One of my respondents volunteered his ideas in any case. In contrast to the fact that he had never in his working

life heard a woman mention feeling ill or in pain due to her period, he remarks:

> "N: ...Occasionally I've been in contact with women at work where I've thought they were having a period, and I think that's to do with a certain aroma, a certain smell
>
> SL: ah
>
> N: ... that I've associated with having periods. Now to be honest, again, I've never talked to anybody about this so ()* just a notion I have that certain women, or women in certain circumstances, do give off some smell. It's different to a sweat... it's not a straightforward body odour in that sense, I mean I wouldn't swear to it,...() a mysterious smell..." (N6/7)

These are issues which the men's group chose to discuss, although again I had not asked them questions about it. The group serves as a useful check here, for the fact that they are free to set their own agenda prevents me from avoiding topics which make me uneasy, but which may be very present in men's consciousnesses about menstruation. I was not very concerned with these questions, and I find the men's concern offensive, but it is useful to know about it nonetheless. It comes up in the group in several contexts:

> "... The only thing I do remember about menstruation in my childhood, was the smell of my mother's

* () double brackets indicate matter omitted.

menstrual blood, because I'm sure she must have had very heavy menstrual periods. I know she was anaemic, and she was never very well, but looking back on it, I've never. I've only thought about this recently, but I'm sure that she had very heavy periods, and I was aware of the smell, that she wasn't well at certain, you know, quite regularly. And I reckon that's what it must have been. She's not alive anymore so I can't ask her... It's not exactly the sort of thing you can ask your father...

- (at the) Christmas dinner table!

- so, I suspect, I was sort of aware of that as a physical thing, but in a way repelled by it - I didn't like the smell and I found it a bit frightening, I knew my mum wasn't well and I was very close to my mum. And when this was happening, you know I could just sort of,... a sensation, a feeling in the air, at that time of the month, I guess, that I didn't...

- what age was that?

- Well actually I think it goes back quite young, to being 8 or 9 at least, if not even earlier... Being aware of the smell, not knowing what it was, but associating it with something rather tense and unpleasant for my mother. I may be imagining it a bit, but I know that I react to that smell with a certain kind of... it brings back childhood memories of being rather unhappy. Um... It wasn't until years later that I realised what that smell was... very distinctive...

- I don't know

- you don't?

- I don't, no, I can't remember what the smell is. I can't remember a smell... particularly ... can you?

- I can, yes... definitely my first memories of it, probably from that kind of age

- and what particular smell?

- Oh, I don't know, I've got a very sensitive nose, me... (laughter and talk, unclear)

- perhaps () conceal the smell, perhaps it's confused or something, but certainly as you say it was associated in my mind with not being in a particularly good mood all the time, and the rest of it, not so much ill, but... the whole thing sort of goes together. And similarly, I didn't know exactly what was going on, it was definitely a rather funny smell and I guess women just used sanitary towels then, and I think that's actually got a lot to do with it. And then the whole sort of build up after that as you get all these bits in Boots, like "feminine hygiene" and all the rest of it, which kind of people lurk off to, and that was an embarrassing sort of subject I think and you sensed that it was an embarrassing subject...

- mm... I still, I can,... maybe I've got a very sensitive nose, but I mean when X is having a period, I can often, you know...

- mm

- I'm aware of that smell, I don't know why, in the loo. And it doesn't have the same effect, but it

recalls the effect that it had on me as a child. And I don't feel...

- really?

- ... yes, it's just a curious echo...

- Could you describe it, what the smell is? I've got a feeling it's an almost metallic smell, but I couldn't really explain that.

- It's the smell of blood. I mean it's got a slightly acrid smell, ... the way I could describe it, sort of bitter, slightly... I don't know... acrid is part of it.

- Yes, I don't know exactly how you'd describe it either, actually

- metallic, yes, slightly metallic, yes"

(group pp2/3)

The Collins English Dictionary tells me that "acrid" means: 1. unpleasantly pungent or sharp to the smell or taste, 2. sharp or caustic especially in speech or nature. It is striking that the adjectives given by the men here are not only different but actually opposite to those mentioned by Merves' women. The men say bitter where the women say sweet, the men say metallic where the women say earthy; acrid implies sharp where the women said heavy. The association with sickness is present in both accounts. In this discussion the men seem to agree about the unpleasantness and the nature of the smell of menstrual blood, although later one man says that he likes the smell for its sexual connotations, as we shall see.

Another man in the group also speaks about childhood memories of his mother in somewhat similar terms, although he is not speaking about the smell of menstruation as such, but about other 'female'-associated smells:

> "Did I tell you about finding in my mother's bedside cabinet,... do you remember those tubes, Pansticks, the sort of make-up foundation, and they're an oval tube, about six inches long,... like a big lipstick, and my mother used to use it as a foundation, I mean it stinks,... if you think of smells that conjure up memories,... I remember going into her bedside cupboard, and finding what I thought was one of these pansticks, and in fact, when I opened it up, it was a plastic container for two tampax, no, lillets,... and I had no idea what they were, again it was only later ...() when I realised what they were, and then went back to it. But I distinctly remember, you know, I had a real bad association with this Panstick, and opening up this plastic container, and finding these two large thin, paper-covered things which were... which I didn't know what they were..." (group 4)

The significance of this account is that it should caution us in taking the unpleasantness of the smell of menstruation for small boys as some sort of natural fact, for here is a man apparently attaching a very similar significance to the smell of his mother's make-up, to a synthetic perfume, in fact.

The issue of the smell of menstrual blood also comes up

when the group discusses oral sex, something which causes them a good deal of anxiety, as we shall see in Chapter 8. One man mentions liking the smell of dried blood on his hands, as a reminder of an earlier sexual encounter. This conversation leads to a further discussion about the smell of sexual secretions generally. Again they have different feelings about it, some liking the smell after sexual intercourse, others disliking it. Here they are evidently referring to traditional heterosexual-penetration sex:

"- you go to work the next morning having not washed after making love? (laughter)

- why not?

- fucking hell! (laughter)

- I wash immediately afterwards

- I almost always have a bath afterwards...

- yes, yes

- it stinks!

- it's not the blood, it's just...

- And X always wants to have a wash... always wants to wash herself afterwards

- stinks!

- because to spend the rest of the night, or hours..

- what's that smell like fish-o-bake? (laughter)

- yes yes

- It's a very strong smell like fish (laughter)

- well it's true

- yours doesn't I suppose?"

(group pp 25/26)

(this part of the tape is rather indistinct so some of

the discussion is missing)

The issue of the smell of menstruation here overlaps with the more general issue of male beliefs about the smell of women's genitals. Shere Hite discovered a strand of preoccupation with smell and generally with the dirtiness of women's genitals in her studies of men's view of women (1981). In her research, as in the discussion in the men's group, this came out especially in response to questions about oral sex: a few comments among many are these:

> "How does one ask a woman politely to wash?"
>
> "Cunnilingus stinks! The smell is horrendous!"
>
> "You can rub and scrub and clean it well, but you can't get rid of that codfish smell."
>
> "If I want to have oral sex with a gal, I am saying to her 'You are clean'."
>
> "I like oral sex done on me only." (pp 688/9)

Some refer directly to cunnilingus during mensturation:

> "I like the warmth and moisture of my partner's genitals, and I enjoy the very pleasant odour of them. The only time I do not like cunnilingus is during her period, although I have done it and was surprised that I could not tell the difference in taste or odour. That was early in her period."
>
> "Menstruation makes little difference to me. Oral sex with a tampon in place is just the same as when she is not menstruating. Without a tampon, I reserve the right to refuse but that is unlikely..." (p.693)

It seems to me to be difficult to analyse these ideas about smell, for of course we generally think of smell as a straightforward sensation, unaffected by social relationships. However ideas about smell are clearly part of the complex of beliefs about dirt which people often hold about people they see as inferior to themselves. Thus the idea that Black or Asian people "smell" is part of British racist thinking, and this statement is sometimes made as a racial insult. It emphasises a supposedly 'natural' difference, and implies inferiority.

Because bodies and bodily substances do undoubtedly smell, it is difficult to separate out and make visible the social meanings of saying someone or something smells. Perhaps this accusation would be found to be a relatively new one, historically, - for it is only very recently that detergents and piped water have made an extremely high level of sanitation and deodorisation possible in developed countries. Bringing home Mary Douglas's ideas about pollution fully would involve comprehending the meanings of cleanliness in relation to sex, race and class in our society. This is much complicated by such factors as the practical reality that the ability to keep oneself clean is in our society very much class based, and was until recently an extremely clear signal of class membership.

In terms of women, and menstruation, then, what does it mean that we find disagreements between Merves' women and my men about the nature of the smell, and yet in Golub's

study, 57% of the males and 56% of the females agreed that "a woman smells different when she is menstruating"? Golub's formulation is a particularly neutral one - the women and the men could mean very different things when they agreed with it. Shere Hite points out that "While the fact that all bodies need bathing rather regularly would seem to go without saying, no man mentioned the necessity for brushing teeth regularly to make kissing pleasant." (p. 692) I am inclined to see this insistence on the need for washing to be an observance of menstrual etiquette: men's manhood in some way requires that women acknowledge their possible impurity before coming into contact with a man.

Shirley Ardener (1973) has written a very interesting account of African cultures where there are ritualised forms of sexual insult to women which, if made to a woman, are followed by fierce protest from the women acting as a group. In some places it has recently been given the force of law that these insults should not be made. The form the insult takes is for a man to assert that "the lower part of women" smell. Ardener draws an analogy between female militancy of this sort in Africa and the women's liberation movement in this country.

This draws attention to the importance of social rules about what may be <u>said</u>, as a separate issue from what anyone may <u>think</u>. The only incident I can call to mind where a man in this culture has even implied to women's face that menstruation smells is the statements I quote (in

Chapter 12, section 12.2) where a male MP talks in the House of Commons about women "tending to use soap". This was indeed taken as an insult by the women present. Women being a very small minority in the House of Commons may perhaps have made this man feel safe in behaving as he would if the women were not there. And the Speaker prevented moves to ask him to apologise. It appears to be generally socially acceptable for men to hold this kind of belief, but not to express it to women.

Another part which must be fitted in to this complex of ideas is the idea that people can tell when a woman is menstruating. One aspect of this is where they think they can tell from her behaviour. Another is the idea that she gives out physical signs or that her appearance changes in some way.

50% of the women in Merves' sample say they change their dress in some way during their periods. The change tends to be towards darker and looser fitting clothes. Golub's study found that when asked "Does a woman look different when she is menstruating?" 29% of the males and 67% of the females replied that she does. We do not know in what way they think women look different, or, again, whether the women are saying that they feel that they look different themselves, or whether they notice that other women look different.

This is another point where my data is inadequate: as I

have explained, I did not ask the right questions. Again, however, this issue arises in the discussion in the men's group, indicating that it is one which is present in some men's minds:

"- I don't know, I've noticed that you can almost always tell when a woman's having a period, because of the skin on her face

- really, gosh, I've never...

- well, not always, but it seems to affect their...

- texture or colour? or both?

- yes well quite a lot of women actually start coming out a little bit spotty and perhaps cover it up, and they're women you know just aren't spotty, and this only goes... sometimes it's spots, sometimes the colour changes, things like that

- mm

- I used to only really notice that in people I was having relationships with, or else I knew very well () and you could see... I mean I don't think it happens to every woman... but it is,... Particularly because, makeup and so on just isn't used to the same extent that it used to be ... in the past it would be plastered over. Or if sometimes women who don't usually use make-up suddenly use it, suddenly start, for no obvious reason. It clearly does have some certain physical effect." (group 18/19)

We have already seen that one of my respondents thought he could tell when a woman was menstruating by her smell. It is interesting that none of them mention having observed

the changes of clothing that women report making.

Now we have men asserting that they can tell when a woman is menstruating by her smell or her appearance. They may, of course, be right. What is rather more important, however, is why they set such store by being able 'to tell', and the fact that they choose to focus on negative indicators, most usually an unpleasant smell, variously described.

I would see this preoccupation as part of an attempt to exert some control over one process which they perceive as out of their control. Even if they do properly observe the etiquette, women are held to 'give themselves away' - they cannot entirely escape the discredit which attaches to menstruation because their attempts at concealment can be seen through. The theme of control will re-emerge in various contexts in later chapters.

4.2.5 The Public/Private Distinction

In terms of contexts in which menstruation is discussed between women and men, my data reflects and confirms Merves'. Looking at the two data sets side by side, patterns begin to emerge in relation to the settings in which certain sorts of interaction take place, to how etiquette is affected by social context. Merves quotes a recent US study reported in the National Organisation for Women Times (Sloane, 1982):

> "Sixty four percent of the 1000 questioned said that women at work should hide the fact that they are menstruating; 36% said they should also hide the fact while at home; and 12% of the males and 5% of the females added that menstruating women should stay away from other people while afflicted."

Understandings about what behaviour is appropriate to different settings are very much implicit ones, part of what we take for granted about social life. The parameters of this question are also of course not concrete (eg the walls of a house), but consist themselves in social understandings. To find out how these subtle social rules work, we must draw together indications from wherever they may emerge.

One interesting source of information is to look at what impact participating in the study has on the respondents, for rules may become obvious if they are violated. Merves found that very few of her respondents admitted to feeling any embarrassment during the interview itself. She points out, however, that at several points in the interviews respondents tended to give joking responses, or to giggle. Questions which produced joking behaviour were about terms used, their ideas about the purpose of menstruation (women tended to say things like "to punish me!"), and about how they would explain menstruation to a pre-menstrual teenager ("not the way I was told!", and so on). This kind of joking response might, as Merves implies, be a cover for

embarrassment, or it might be a way of expressing feelings of ambiguity about the matter in hand. Her respondents were generally very positive about the experience of the interview: "interesting", "enjoyable", "... good experience. Being interviewed really helps me to think of these things.", "... part of my growing awareness of myself as a woman, and the joy of it". They often felt that such research was a good thing:

> "...it's about time women weren't made to feel uncomfortable about their bodies..."
>
> "...needs to be talked about... it's been a skeleton in the closet for too many years..." (p.162)

Women do, as Merves shows, talk to one another about menstruation in 'normal' social life, so in one sense the situation Merves created was not so much out of the ordinary. However her research is part of 'public life', in that it is aimed at making women's experiences visible in the public sphere, and it is this to which these last comments refer.

The men in my sample responded to questions I asked about their experience of the interview in a very similar way to Merves' women. None of them said they had been embarrassed at the time, although quite a few had expected to be:

> "I'm surprised at how comfortable I was..." (C)
>
> "I thought that when the time came I'd be a bit embarrassed... when I ask my girlfriend or anything like that they get embarrassed..." (L)

"No problem, really... no, I don't have any inhibitions about it." (N)

Many had found it "interesting", and several said that they thought the issue important:

"I've always been very fascinated by the whole thing." (K)

"Actually I thought, oh, someone's doing research into menstruation,I thought oh what a strange subject to do research into, but then I had to think about my reaction to that, why I felt that. Why is it such a taboo subject? And I was very nervous, very wary about being interviewed... I'm not sure why, I think it is because it is a very taboo subject. I mean something like sex, there's always been some sort of impetus for men to learn about it or find out about it. But menstruation has always been kept very much under covers, if you know what I mean... And then I realised that what is interesting is not the fact that you're doing research into menstruation,but the fact that it's very rarely done, that nobody does any research into it." (J 1)

"I think it's very important." (E)

Several men linked my interviewing them with other changes in their lives recently. For one man this was beginning to talk about a range of "women's issues" with his wife - for several it was attending groups to discuss sexual politics. Another speaks about a woman friend:

"...there's a very close friend () got aware of menstruation as a feminist issue... charts,

identifying the points in her cycle, and all that kind of thing. But that's a new experience, that's raising the issue in a rather different kind of way, um, expressing... it's easier, certainly I find it easier to take that kind of discussion... it means you can actually raise the question about personally how you feel about this - it doesn't have the connotation of something that really shouldn't be talked about but between close friends can be discussed with them, so in other words it's a step in trying to say, this is a normal event, more than half the population have experienced or will experience menstruation, we can't pretend it doesn't exist. That seems a fairly positive way forward, because I didn't like the experiences I had, looking back on it, thinking about what we've discussed this afternoon,I mean that wasn't very helpful - it wasn't helpful to me, it wasn't helpful to the women I had relationships with." (M10)

This cheerful attitude to the interviews in retrospect, however, contrasts strongly with these same men's very first reaction to the idea of being interviewed. Many of the men I interviewed came into contact with me through a list being circulated at an evening class they were attending on sexual politics, which they were asked to sign up on. The first time it went round, none of them put their names to it, and it was only on seeing it again, at a later meeting, that they agreed to be interviewed. The men's group which taped the discussion for me also decided

not to do so the first time they discussed it, and only later changed their minds. One of the men I interviewed individually mentioned that he was attending another men's group, and that they might discuss the issue. I said I would be interested if they would tape their discussion for me. He replied, laughing:

> "Well, it'd be a very polite discussion. They're watching what they're saying all the time..."

I cannot draw any clear conclusion from these observations, but it makes me think that what produces embarrassment is very specific - not just what topic is raised, but who raises it, how they speak about it, what frame of reference the interaction is seen within (for instance one man placed the interview in a 'scientific' frame of reference: "I thought I'd be embarrassed when I came round to it.. but, what with doing a lot of science anyway, you can talk about rats and all that... scientific and that..." (L4). It is also well understood by all the respondents, Merves' and mine, that social propriety in relation to menstruation is in a state of crisis and change.

My impression is that generally it is women, not men, who suffer public embarrassment over menstruation. However, there are incidents when men do so, or are aware of acting to avoid such embarrassments:

> "- the attitude in which it's held by men, I mean this man gave me a lift when I was hitching, in this lorry (carrying Tampax) and I can remember going into the

> transport cafe with him, and all the other drivers saying things like "here he is, the daft bleeder", ... And this man was just mortified with embarrassment, you could see he didn't want to drive this lorry, he wanted to drive something respectable and masculine. (laughter) It's strange because I felt like distancing myself from him in some way." (group p.13)
>
> "... things like VAT being put on tampons and things like that, which, I mean I've been to political meetings where that's been raised as an issue, in the Labour Party,and men say, Oh, let's get back to politics, things like that. And I haven't backed them up, the women, I haven't backed the women up, even though I agree with them..." (I 7)

It is interesting that the men in the men's group laugh at a story told by one of them:

> "- a wonderful thing, coming out of Sainsburys, this massive big fat bloke, with this box full of shopping, and it was a Tampax box, wonderful, you know..." (group p.13)

This incident is only funny within the context of shame relating to menstruation. If the person carrying the box had been a woman, would that have been funny? Would the men's group have thought it acceptable to find it funny? The joke seems to be men being involuntarily and publicly associated with this discreditable thing.

It is important to look at the circumstances in which the stigma of menstruation can rub off onto men, for this is a

matter of demarcation. The male group polices individual men with ridicule, much as it polices women.

Drawing together some of the strands we can see in the comparison of male to female experiences of interactions relating to menstruation, we see the public/private distinction running through the men's remarks, but it is not so apparent in the women's. To repeat a revealing comment from the group discussion:

> "When you first come across someone who is menstruating who you're close to... Even though I knew all the mechanics of it, and I understood the thing, it seemed, you know, like a source of worry, because all the taboos had been about women in general, they hadn't been about a particular woman..." (group p.9)

We find no equivalent distinction from the women's point of view - thus Merves' respondents mentioned that they would prefer not to discuss menstruation with male members of their own families. It appears that there is no shared definition of what constitutes public and private between women and men. I would suggest that for women, there could be no such clear distinction, as in the statement above, between men in general and a particular man, because of the power inequality. The woman is not in a position to decide that she can ignore the normal etiquette in regard to any particular man without risking offending his masculinity. When a young girl is told about menstruation, she is told not to let men know about it - not not to let <u>some</u> men know

about it, or men in public settings, or whatever. Men are the public, from her point of view. If couples negotiate to waive these rules, this is a matter of the man making a concession - women cannot expect it, as such. The split in settings, then, is maintained by men, who may simultaneously acknowledge menstruation's existence in their private lives and deny it in public. Thus the same interaction could be understood as a public one by the woman involved and as a private one by the man.

It is also important to look at how these boundaries may change over time - in Chapters 11 and 12 I will return to these issues in considering the ways in which people have attempted to bring both 'PMT' and the issue of taxation into the public eye.

4.2.6 The Meanings of Menstruation

This last section of this chapter discusses in a more general way the interpretations women and men put upon menstruation. Esther Merves asked a number of questions which reveal the attitudes of her sample of women quite clearly: I had more difficulty in eliciting such general statements from my interviewees. However, this difference in response is useful in indicating the quite different realms of discourse within which women and men view menstruation.

Merves asked her sample what they thought was the purpose

of menstruation. Their responses fall into four themes. Its relation to fertility and childbearing was the most frequently mentioned theme. Secondly many women had the idea that menstruation carries out a cleansing function. Thirdly they saw it as a "part of womanhood", or "a bodily function" - a feature of the female body with no intrinsic purpose. Finally some women regarded menstruation as a sign of good health. Merves writes that "a few women said they didn't know, or had never thought about it" (p.107). On this question, as we have seen, a number of women initially joked in response, replying that its purpose is "to torture me", "to aggravate me" and so on. One woman replied seriously that menstruation was intended "as punishment for the original sin of procreation" (p.108).

I did originally intend to ask men a question about the purpose of menstruation but I ended up leaving this question off the final questionnaire because of the reactions I got to it. I found this kind of question tended to make men I spoke to anxious, because they had not considered it very much and my asking made them feel that they should have done so.

Looking at less direct indications, in so far as men did have ideas about the purpose of menstruation, they do not seem to me to have much in common with women's. Although many men knew intellectually that menstruation was biologically connected with reproduction, few actively made that connection in their own minds. Detailed data on this

question are discussed in Chapter 7, where I will challenge the very common tendency to explain men's attitudes to menstruation by reference to their alleged connection of it to reproduction.

As we have seen, one of my respondents was very involved in ideas about menstruation having a cleansing function. Only one other man mentioned such ideas though as we have seen a few did express the related idea that menstrual blood is dirty. No man spoke of menstruation as a sign of health. The idea of menstruation as "part of womanhood" was not often put forward, though it came up in statements men made about how menstruation ought to be viewed, when some of them would stress its normality. However menstruation clearly was seen in this way in some sense - in that it was often associated by the men with other "women's issues".

Another set of responses through which Merves aimed to produce a picture of what women felt about menstruation was a question about what the women would say to a pre-menstrual teenager, in preparing her for it. Their replies fall into three themes. 95% of them said they would give some sort of biological/anatomical explanation, and 61.7% would mention its relation to childbearing. In terms of describing what accompanies menstruation, around 40% mentioned each of: what to use; what to expect; that they might experience emotional changes; and some advice from the woman's own experience of menstruation. Finally the women offered a range of interpretations of

menstruation. The most commonly given one was that "It's a natural occurrence" (45.0%). 38.3% would say that "every woman menstruates". Some variation of the theme of "It doesn't change your life" was given by 18.3% of the women. On the other hand 11.7% spoke about menstruation as "special".

Merves writes that "all the respondents clearly expressed that they would try to dispel fears and myths and explain that menstruation is nothing to be ashamed of" (p.104). She sees a tension between the two themes of "playing it down" and emphasising its "specialness". Sexuality was mentioned by some women, always indirectly, in relation to avoiding pregnancy. Finally many of the women emphasized that the girl should be told that she could talk about menstruation again on other occasions should she want to.

Merves mentions that the women made it clear that how they would explain menstruation would be different from how they actually experience menstruation and from how they had experienced it in the past. What we are given here is a sort of ideal statement - what women would like women's experience of menstruation to be. Merves does not give us a comparison of these statements with accounts of actual occasions on which her respondents had explained menstruation to young girls, which would have been interesting.

It is striking in the women's accounts that they do not

mention the one item which is consistently present in accounts I have heard of explanations actually given to young girls - that they should not let men/their father/ their brothers know they are menstruating.

I can find little to set beside this vision in my data. In my sample, the only father of adolescent daughters has little contact with them relating to menstruation. When I questioned him about their menarches, he recalled the first: "I don't know if she actually announced it to me - I'm trying to think whether she did. It may have been her mother who told me. But I think I would have made a comment on it..." (N6) Clearly, as one would expect, he felt no responsibility to speak to his daughters about periods before they began.

For most men, then, no occasion is likely to arise where they will be expected to produce an account of the meaning of menstruation, equivalent to this kind of occasion which women may encounter as mothers.

Still considering the meanings of menstruation for women, Merves writes that "the findings support the notion that one can still think of menstruation as positive or natural while acknowledging possible effects." (p.139). In contrast, this is something which a number of the men in my own study found extremely problematic:

> "...I think that I thought that anything that was biological, anything that actually happened to half

the population, couldn't possibly be something which would make women, sort of, unable to function for periods of time. I mean I still think that that is really strange, that there should be something which is a biological function which actually creates a situation where people are unable to do things in the way they would do normally. I can remember that was often a male reaction to period pains, that it was something that was completely not understandable, that it was something that was, that shouldn't happen, so therefore, men tended to think that it didn't happen, that it was something that women made up, to get out of things..." (A 7)

The men's group discuss this question a good deal:

"- Well, what I meant by that was that I'm not so sure how much I can help, or do anything, or how much I should (if a woman has pains)... I'm very conscious of the sort of... problem... of treating a woman who's menstruating as incapable, or incapacitated, or ill, in the sense that they're not able to... sort of "does he take sugar" sort of syndrome. That they suddenly become a non-person or something. And sympathy and doing things and trying to help out in a way more than you do at other times... I'm very conscious of that debate and that dividing line between treating a woman as though she loses a sense of identity simply because she's menstruating

- you know that debate that says... who is it that's

been saying that women shouldn't hold top jobs and shouldn't be things like pilots because once a month they're likely to have their efficiency grossly reduced? that sort of argument

- in a way there are two sides to it

- yes, there are, there are! A bit like maternity and paternity rights... if people are in pain, some recognition should be given to that, for three days of the month... it can also be taken to say they should be excluded from doing men's work, which is different.

- crazy

- they've tried to mix the two together, haven't they? those who take that position, have actually tried to say this and therefore that..." (group p.11)

"- It's totally impossible for us to imagine what a curse it must be then

- well that's another thing...

- the curse

- because it must be. Particular people... first experience it... don't really know what's happening... I mean if I started bleeding anywhere, in any part of my body, and I didn't know what was going on... oh, it would be awful.

- the thing is, we all view it basically as a negative event, and that's the way it is viewed, but what interests me, I've been reading this book called The Paradise Papers, which is about female deities... I doubt whether the historical evidence is there, but probably if you go into fertility rites... probably

> menstruating is seen as very positive,... certainly because sex and so on was quite important in those religions. It may have been with the upgrowth of male deities, a takeover..."
>
> "-... No I was just thinking about the practicalities of it, let alone what it actually signifies... just the idea of knowing that every month, if you, if somebody gets pain with it, is going to get pain, and at a minimum, an absolute minimum, is going to be inconvenienced, every bloody month." (group p.15)

The problem is not resolved - either it is social negativity which creates problems about menstruation and it could be trouble-free 'if only', or it is 'naturally' crippling, and women are to be seen as handicapped. The two are seen as opposed. As we shall see, doctors exhibit considerable anxiety about how to define 'normal' menstruation. The ideas we will discuss in Chapter 10 in relation to menstrual pain, that 'natural' women, whether living in primitive societies or eating natural food, would not suffer with menstruation are part of this complex of ideas. It is very interesting to learn that women <u>do</u> reconcile these for themselves in their own understandings of menstruation.

Another important finding of Merves' is that several of the attitude variables, importantly "bothersome", "denial of effects", "debilitating", depend in large part upon the characteristics of the respondent's own menstrual cycle (p. 151). This is something which common sense could tell us: that women whose periods give them pain might feel

menstruation to be debilitating, or that women with regular cycles might be more likely to be conscious of anticipating menstruation. However the fact that it is visible from Merves' careful statistical analysis may perhaps encourage other researchers to include questions about women's own menstrual experiences when they ask 'attitude' questions. Thus a lot of circular reasoning might be avoided.

Gynaecologists, too, have observed that attitudes towards the menstrual cycle tend to fit with symptoms women experience with it. But we shall see, doctors choose to interpret this correlation as containing a cause and effect. They believe the attitude causes the symptom (see Chapters 9 and 10) defying common sense in pursuit of abstract theories.

One further point in relation to this finding is that I have the strong impression that among the men I interviewed, many of their attitudes (and certainly their preoccupations) depended upon the menstrual cycle characteristics of the women they had been associated with. These differences emerge occasionally in the discussion in the men's group. One aspect of this worth noting, is that young men are relatively likely to have experience of women who are on the Pill, which transforms a woman's menstrual cycle completely. Thus some men's idea of a 'normal' cycle may actually come from knowledge of women whose cycles are in fact artificially controlled. Merves included remarkably few women using oral contraceptives, so we can

say no more about this from her study.

In the interviews, men who had knowledge of more than one woman's menstrual experiences tended to have more, and more complex, ideas about menstruation - they had been forced to attempt to understand it for themselves instead of merely learning to live with one woman's construction of it. Every woman, on the other hand, is obliged to live through various and perhaps conflicting feelings and experiences in relation to menstruation, and will tend therefore to synthesise a more subtle understanding of it for herself.

One set of Merves' data which is particularly relevant to my own study of men, is her respondents' accounts of the attitudes of the people they personally considered most important - if married this would include their husbands, for others "intimate friends". She writes that women in all cells described their female friends' attitudes as "emphathetic and supportive", even when the friend might herself hold negative attitudes towards menstruation.

Among male attitudes, she discerns four types:

1. Extremely negative, almost hostile: "it makes him sick"; He thinks it's disgusting, irritating and it gets in his way". Included in this category are men who say such things as "I'm glad I'm a man", "Are you on the rag again?"
2. Indifferent, or, as many women put it "matter-of-fact". This was a very common attitude.
3. Supportive, even nurturant. These tended to be the

husbands of the young married women.

4. Patronising: "He claims I'm more bitchy"; "He doesn't understand. He thinks it affects me more than it does."

These themes emerged from all four sampling cells. Merves writes that "They generally related to menses as an illness or to menses as a sexual disruption".

"Older married women expressed their husbands' attitudes as more often indifferent than as supportive". "Women with female partners expressed numerous sentiments - that their partners were modest, some thought it was interesting, and others disliked it. None, however, were patronising." I find this passing reference to lesbians frustrating. We are not told what proportion of the sample are lesbian, or indeed, anything about her other respondents' sexual relationships except for whether or not they are married. Of course going into this would have made analysis very complicated, but it would have been interesting to be able to see how much difference and how much similarity could be seen in the way in which menstruation would be dealt with between lesbian sexual partners as between heterosexuals. Merves notes that women in lesbian relationships would be an important population for further study.

One should not, however compare female sexual partners' attitudes with male as if one was comparing like to like. As is clear from the above summary, men's attitudes within sexual relationships are little different from the range of

attitudes one would generally find expressed by men. Women, too, could be expected to react to menstruation in a lover in ways to some extent determined by their general views of menstruation in relation to themselves and to women as a group. What might be special to the sexual relationship has yet to be discovered.

To return to women's accounts of men's attitudes. It is easy to recognise the range of attitudes that they refer to in the men in my sample. Merves' statement that men's views generally relate to menstruation either as an illness or as a sexual disruption certainly covers the greatest part of the content of my interviews.

It is interesting that the women named research into men's attitudes, their learning processes and so on as a priority for further investigation. They clearly express that they do not feel they fully understand men's view of menstruation. As I shall argue, this may be because not all of the relevant interactions which form men's experience relating to menstruation are available to women.

Merves summarises her findings by describing four components within her data on women's experience of menstruation - I will quote from her directly here, for her logic is not totally clear to me:

> "Menstruation has its meaning embedded in cultural beliefs about the body. Bodily functions are generally thought of as unclean and menstruation

shares that meaning. Hence, it is "messy", "gross" and "dirty". Many religions have strong prohibitions surronding menstruation for this reason. The study of sexuality includes this notion and in this study the two were mixed. The preference for little sexual contact was directly related to disdain for contact with the menstrual fluid. Certainly if menstrual fluid represents bodily waste, human contact is not desirable.

Another meaning of menstruation is pain or discomfort. Those who are bedridden during menstruation, or who suffer from cramps, or nausea, experience menstruation as an illness.

Other meanings of menstruation relate to fertility and child bearing. Menstruation here represents a loss and is the negative pole of the positive value attached to ovulation. However, to women not desirous of children, menstruation is viewed as a blessing, although its value still relates to ovulation.

Finally menstruation is often regarded as a sign of youth and its cessation, menopause, represents another important point of inquiry. That menstruation was viewed as a sign of health and that some felt it prevents the drying of the skin may be indicative of the social meaning of ageing; although to others menstruation was thought to be a nuisance after so

many years." (pp 166/167)

Merves sees some components as being strongly meaningful to a woman in some circumstances, others in others.

I find this analysis unsatisfactory, especially the first paragraph. I am not convinced that cultural distaste for menstruation derives centrally and simply from general cultural ideas about bodily functions, as Merves argues here. Eating is, after all, a bodily function, but far from hiding it, we celebrate it. This conclusion does not seem to me, either, to be drawn directly from Merves' data, for she had not gathered data on the attitudes her sample held towards other bodily functions. Neither had she asked direct questions about women's notions of cleanliness and uncleanliness in relation to menstruation. If this were the basis of the problem, it should be possible to predict the type and the intensity of social rules regarding menstruation in a culture from that culture's general attitudes towards bodily wastes. This does not seem to me to be so.

It is possible, though, that my feeling against this interpretation comes from looking at the male perspective. Again I did not ask quite the right questions to test this idea. But no man said to me that this was how he saw menstruation, and one explicitly stated that he did not (N8). This does not, of course mean that women may not see menstruation as unclean for different reasons from the ones that men might.

Women's attention to menstruation is compelled in a way in which men's is not - men's consciousness may consist of very different areas of concern depending upon their experiences.

In the interviews, many men emphasized to me how little they had thought about menstruation in the past:

> "Once I got your letter I thought about it more than I'd ever thought about it before, which is a reflection of the fact that I'd never thought about it." (J6)
>
> "...Trouble is, it doesn't really enter into men's lives that much really... when you come to think about it, it really doesn't... that's because men try to dissociate themselves from it so much." (I6)
>
> "I don't think I have any particular hangups about it at all, other than the fact that I haven't given it a great deal of thought, and maybe I should have done... I mean it's just one of being fairly sympathetic really, in the sense of, I can't do anything about it. " (N8)

Several men associated concern with menstruation with starting to have sexual relationships with women:

> "I don't think I really thought about periods until I started having sex." (G3)
>
> "... with men, other boys, finding out that way, gradually...() but it was subsequently in terms of more, closer, closer and sexual relationships with

> women that I became - I began to understand menstruation in quite a different sense. That's an impression. But I mean the whole issue of menstruation didn't really have an impact on my existence, as you can see, from that kind of pattern, all boys' school, most friends boys, family... no immediate sisters...." (M 3)
>
> "I mean I don't think that,... I mean my major impression of what men think about menstruation is that they don't. They may use it to get at individual women, they may use it in their personal relationships... but I think they only ever think about it when confronted with it..." (A 11)
>
> "I think I thought of it in terms of, as a bloody nuisance, sexually, so it wasn't that it had any sort of, um sexual significance, it was that it was obviously tied up with sexuality because it happened to women, because it happened to the women I was sexually involved with." (A 10)

This presents many problems of interpretation. An association with sexuality is certainly a theme which comes out in many men's accounts. But a sexual involvement is often the first close relationship of any description that a man has with a woman, so how important is the sexual element in fact? There is also the problem that in patriarchal thinking, men tend to see women and sexuality as very much bound up together, so how could anything so clearly related to women not come within the sphere of

sexuality from the male point of view? I will discuss the specific questions related to sexuality in Chapter 8. Catharine MacKinnon (1982) has argued that gender and sexuality are inextricably bound up together, and that the attempt to make an analytical distinction between them is misguided. This issue certainly looks like a case in point.

In comparing data from women and men, I have devoted much of this chapter to a comparison of my own findings and those of Esther Merves. This exercise has usefully drawn out the systematically different ways in which men and women tend to interpret menstruation, and has begun to reveal the negative images produced by the men. The etiquette of menstruation, which is further discussed in the next chapter, has begun to become visible. The descriptive data presented in this chapter forces one to start rethinking conventional views of the social phenomena around menstruation.

CHAPTER 5

POLLUTION, TABOO, AND ETIQUETTE

5.1 POLLUTION

Because of the very great emphasis which many writers on menstruation have placed upon pollution beliefs, I have tended in my work to concentrate upon developing ways of describing other aspects of this society's ways of dealing with menstruation. As Jessica Mayer (1983) pointed out, concern with pollution has tended to "bracket out" meanings which relate to the gender hierarchy. However, as Mayer also points out, one cannot reduce pollution to gender.

It would be foolish to ignore the fact that elements of pollution belief exist both within and alongside the etiquette of menstruation which I have begun to describe. Within my own data I found no evidence that the men I interviewed feared any danger from menstrual blood, but there was certainly some evidence that at least some of them saw it as dirty or impure in some way. It should also be said that it is highly likely that men who did hold more intense danger/pollution beliefs about menstruation would have selected themselves out of my sample, so on this subject particularly my data must be regarded with suspicion.

I would accept Mary Douglas' (1966) view that pollution

beliefs should be seen as a continuum covering both danger beliefs relating to religious thinking and the ideas about dirt which we usually take for granted. Dirt is indeed "matter out of place" and the treatment of menstrual blood as dirty represents a judgement on the 'place' of menstruating women. "The prohibitions trace the cosmic outlines and the ideal social order",(p.72) and patriarchal cultures very frequently regard menstruation as in some way anomalous.

In my interviews I asked a question about how the men saw menstrual blood - whether they thought of it as like other blood, blood from a wound. The most classic pollution-belief I heard stated to me was in the following speech:

> "I still think of it being sort of dirty or whatever.. more like afterbirth or something like that... not something I'd like to be touching... whereas ordinary blood, I wouldn't bother at all." (D 5)

I was unprepared for such a statement, and totally failed to follow up his reference to afterbirth, though I now have many questions about it. Did he mean the placenta, or the lochia, the bleeding which follows childbirth (tabooed in many cultures)? Had he had any contact with afterbirth? How had he come to see it as dirty?

Other men made a variety of other connections. A number of them did see it as like other blood. One said he had seen it more as associated with "sexual secretions" (A10). A number of them, replying to this question, referred to the

lining of the womb or the uterine wall. One remembered being alarmed by this description, given in a Biology lesson at school: "I used to imagine all sorts of horrible things coming out" (K5). It is interesting how the feeling of horror can be attached to the notion of the lining of the womb, just as it can to menstrual blood as such.

Some men saw menstruation as a kind of cleansing, excretion process:

> "M: I think, in all honesty, I would say it has a measure, something of a measure of impurity about it, which an ordinary cut, it doesn't seem, because it has the connotation of discharge."
>
> SL: Discharge, like vaginal discharge?...
>
> M: Yeah, I think there is that about it, that sort of element.
>
> SL: Whereas ordinary blood wouldn't worry you?
>
> M: I don't think - if you use the term 'worry', I don't think menstrual blood worries me, if you see what I mean. I just sort of feel there is that element in it, in terms of the body functions (unclear) discharge () presumably therefore contains elements which the body is therefore rejecting, I suppose." (M9)

> "H: No I don't (think it's like other blood)... it doesn't bother me so much but I think there are certain impurities which are... it's almost used as an excretory mechanism to get rid of certain impurities

from within the body and I believe that some women have heavier periods because they're trying to get rid of more impurities.

SL: Oh.

H: ... mainly because people I know who're on what I call a pure diet, a balanced diet tend to have very little menstrual bleeding." (H 9)

He continued at length on this theme - "the lining of the uterus, the unfertilised eggs, are discarded because they're not needed,and in a way they are foreign bodies, they are impurities." This man was presenting these ideas as if they were scientific - he thought that chemical analysis might reveal these impurities. As we shall see later in this chapter, some scientists have invested considerable energy in giving such beliefs scientific validity. It is fascinating how the concern with purity of food and so on connects to the notion that a pure/purified women would hardly menstruate.

The sense that menstruation is dirty is also present in what the men said about the smell of menstrual blood, and about their feelings about sanitary wear. One man who seemed to feel the blood was somewhat "unclean", but also that it was alarming by association with blood from a wound, said "I still flinch sometimes when I see STs."(I 4)

It can be quite difficult to interpret men's reactions - to know how to decide what causes what response. Does the following account demonstrate the presence of pollution

belief? Innate fear? Or just a hangover and adolescent nerves?

"... the first woman that I had a really good sexual relationship with... she had a really liberal father, who was an artist, and had built his own house...()... let them sleep together and brought coffee... In fact, I can remember making love with her, at one stage, and she came on the next day, she had a period the next day, and she just woke up, and I was, I'd been drunk, I think, the night before, and I was feeling sort of pretty vulnerable, pretty edgy, sort of on the edge of nauseousness, and there was a lot of blood in the bed. And I didn't even associate it with her menstruating. I just remembered making love the night before, and sort of drinking and nauseousness, and I just puked all over the bed... And she was really freaked out, and I was really freaked out,... And um, yeah, it was horrible, I can still remember the exact colour of the dressing gown, actually seeing the blood, the pool of blood and then blood all over her legs, and it was a really violent sort of image, it wasn't just like the gentle image which I now associate with menstruation. It was really violent, almost like sort of shock horror murder stuff.()

In fact I didn't realise until a couple of years afterwards how much she could have been freaked out by what I did. But then that didn't sort of dissuade her, that was like a mutual experience, and it went on being comfortable enough with her... We were washing

> each other one day, in the bathroom, and as I was washing her, I noticed blood running down the inside of her legs, and just, washed it away, you know, and it just started, well, you know, it's blood, you know, it's nothing wrong. And it was quite nice to be able to feel that close to someone, that I could do that. That was when I was about 16 or 17, and yeah, just sort of developed from there. Got less and less alienated from it." (E 6)

I have not attempted to describe here the evidence that pollution beliefs of various kinds are current within our culture. This has been well-discussed by other writers (Shuttle and Redgrove 1978; Weideger 1978). Advertising for sanitary wear provides a rich source of data here, a kind of play-back of current attitudes (Whisnant, Brett and Zegans 1975; Slavin 1981), as it tries to key in to women's assumed anxieties about 'safety' and 'hygiene'.

There is one aspect which has not been much discussed, however (though cf Birke and Best 1980), and that is the interaction of pollution beliefs and scientific endeavour: the fact that earlier this century scientists appear to have devoted a good deal of energy to the task of demonstrating the existence of a "menstrual toxin". As the most recent positive reference to this work that I have discovered, a letter to the Lancet in 1974, explains, the idea is that "there appears to be a sound pharmacological basis for the ancient beliefs in the toxicity of catamenial loss" (Davis 1974).

A Dr. Bela Schick is credited with, in 1920,

> "reviving the interest of the medical world in one of these superstitions, namely, the wilting of flowers handled by menstruating women, and for carrying out some tests on flowers they touched, the results of which suggested that there was even more contamination in such contact than superstition indicated" (Macht 1943)

David I. Macht seems to have involved himself in researching this question for over 20 years, and his 1943 articles cites 147 references to data he claims to support his primary finding, that "Experimental data demonstrate in the blood and secretions of menstruating women the presence of a toxic substance or menotoxin, which is poisonous for plants and animals". One section of the article is concerned with "Absorption of Poisons through the Male Genitalia" - his investigations into this subject led him to conduct some extremely nasty animal experiments.

M.F. Ashley-Montagu also surveyed the literature, and after mentioning various beliefs about menstruation, writes that:

> "Such conditions form a good foundation for believing almost anything of the menstruous woman, and would certainly lend some support to the suggestion that at such times she is capable of exerting a noxious influence upon the objects with which she comes into physical contact." (1940, p.213)

I am not sure how widely spread the influence of these

ideas has been. I was relieved to find, when I traced one of the sources Ashley-Montagu cites with admiration, a survey article by G.W. Bartelmez (1937) in which she or he in fact states that "There is little or no evidence that the uterus discharges a toxin" (p.57). The complete history of scientific beliefs on this subject remains to be written.

I would argue that pollution beliefs are statements about power relations in society. They define, according to the dominant ideology, what is "matter out of place" and this in turn makes it clear who has control of such social definitions. Thus the idea that people with certain characteristics are dirty is very often found as part of the attitudes of a dominant group towards a less powerful one. It is a persistent feature of racism and anti-semitism as well as of misogyny. In relation to class, too, the upper classes habitually make a distinction between the 'respectable' poor and 'the great unwashed'. Dirt represents lack of self-control, and those whom the powerful wish to control are expected to be eager to demonstrate their compliance. It is sometimes possible to observe the anxiety created in oppressed people by these beliefs, in their attempts to disprove others' beliefs about them.

Judith Okeley has documented the cyclic pattern of beliefs and practices in relation to dirt and purity which exists between Gypsy people and the settled "Gorgio" population

(1983).

Power relationships are a crucial element to take into consideration in understanding pollution rules. Issues related to pollution beliefs re-emerge throughout my work, especially in discussions of the smell of menstrual blood, male culture and of course of sexuality.

5.2 THE ETIQUETTE OF MENSTRUATION

The crucial idea within much of what has been written on the sociology of menstruation is that of the 'menstrual taboo'. This notion, borrowed from anthropology, has been used to describe a very wide range of social practices. Such a discourse often features a description of some example of a very intense taboo practice in some 'other' culture, followed by an assertion that such 'primitive' or 'old-fashioned' ideas still exist even in our society.

As I learnt more about the contradictions and subtleties of the ways in which menstruation is dealt with in our culture, I became increasingly uneasy with this formulation, this way of approaching the subject. But it was also very clear that what is most charged, most significant, about the experience of menstruation does indeed consist very much of matters relating to who may say what to whom, of how various kinds of concealment may be achieved.

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One cannot isolate 'meanings' of menstruation apart from the idea that it is something which must be hidden. Any 'meaning' attached to it cannot be taken to be straightforwardly explanatory of any attached social practices. In short, the meaning of menstruation for many people in many circumstances relates only very dimly to biology, and derives far more strongly from the intricate social rules that people in society attach to it. For this reason I propose the term 'etiquette' as a more accurate general description of the quality of these social rules.

Etiquette is defined by Edward Norbeck (following Leslie White 1959) as "rules of behaviour governing social relations among people of distinct social statuses or classes, hierarchical and non-hierarchical" (Norbeck 1977:72). In his article "A Sanction for Authority: Etiquette", he argues that taboo should be seen as a special class of the larger category of etiquette, "as rules of etiqutte to which supernatural sanctions are attached" (p.73). He then concentrates on pre-modern Japanese and Polynesian rules of behaviour, to show how intensely hierarchical social structures are served by such rules. However, he also suggests that etiquette is important in modern societies, perhaps especially in relation to defining and preserving the social statuses of men and women, where it continues to "reflect and support formal and informal relations of authority" (p.73).

This gives us an interesting perspective on the problems

with the way in which the term 'taboo' is used in much of the modern discourse on menstruation. It is frequently used to refer to any kind of social recognition of menstruation - this leaves one vaguely searching for the missing supernatural sanction.

This search for the fear, the 'reason', behind rules of etiquette is a real distraction from the consequences which follow from the actual practice of the etiquette. Etiquette is enforced, not by fear of magical reprisals, but as Leslie White puts it, by "Social sanctions, such as adverse comment or criticism, ridicule, and ostracism" (White 1959:225).

So let us try to lay out the basic structure of our culture's menstrual etiquette. This is very much a matter of bringing implicitly understood social rules to consciousness. In looking at the data from men, one must attend to the spaces in it, things not said, things not seen.

The rule behind all the others seems to be that women may not draw men's attention to menstruation in any way. This rule is made workable by a secondary allowance that a man may decide to waive the general rule within a particular, usually sexual, relationship with an individual woman.

Some kind of distinction between public and private was a theme which came up repeatedly in my data. To recall an

important point made in the group discussion:

> "When you first come across someone who is menstruating who you're close to... Even though I knew all the mechanics of it, and I understood the thing, it seemed, you know, like a source of worry, because all the taboos had been about women in general, they hadn't been about a particular woman..." (men's group, 9)

To look first at public settings, I asked the men I interviewed whether they had heard reference to menstruation at work. Among all of them, with many years of working life between them, they could remember only three or four instances of women saying that they were off work because of menstrual pain. Where this had happened, it was in somewhat unusual workplaces: from students in a university, and from women in a particularly relaxed and friendly social work office.

One man described a work situation in a way which emphasizes the silent nature of these interactions: we have to take his word for it that these interactions related to menstruation at all:

> "No, I've only... implied. I've got the impression that in some workplaces a few of the women, some of them more or less take it for granted that they can quite freely take a couple of days off about once a month, but there are others who, if they do take a couple of days off, do look quite shy when they

return, as though it was common knowledge why they were away and as though it was something to be ashamed of.

SL: So it would be assumed that that was what it was?

F: yes.

SL: what sort of places have you worked?

F: Well I had in mind a meat packing factory, where most of the men were operating band saws, and the people taking the meat off and putting it onto conveyer belts were women." (F 3/4)

The men reported no instance of a woman referring to mood changes related to menstruation in a public setting. And yet several of them said that remarks about the 'time of the month', as we have seen, are commonplace among men in some workplaces. This is, of course, related to ideas about menopause - it would be very discrediting in most situations for a woman to refer to her own menopausal symptoms, and yet men will speak of older women as affected by the 'time of life'.

In talking about their schooldays, the men again recalled boys joking about menstruation, not girls openly acknowledging it. Women are beginning to count the cost of this silence. Pat Gregory begins an article in Peace News by recounting "a very painful and depressing set of stories" which she and other women friends had recently told one another about their schooldays,

"full of embarrassment and humiliation and the

absolute necessity of concealing what was happening to our bodies.

Teachers who wouldn't let us go to the toilet during lesson time, and so having to wear two tampons (and the discomfort involved), or staying off school altogether on those days; and the stroppy girls one of us knew who, to the disgust and embarrassment of the other girls in her class, waved a sanitary towel in the face of her teacher when he refused to give her permission to leave the class. The anguish of seeing a friend up the corridor with a large blot of blood on the back of her skirt, and not being able to bring oneself to broach the subject with her. And the intense fear that one would find oneself in the same position. Trying inconspicuously to see the back of one's skirt just in case, or to make sure that it was covered by a satchel. Worrying about the bulge and the smell of sanitary towels, and not being able to mention the pain. Not being able to go swimming. And so on and so on and so on." (1983)

There is an interesting footnote to this item, which casts further light on the issue of the public presence of menstruation. In the next issue of the magazine, a page of letters responding to the article were published, including the following from Aileen King:

"As one who takes the selling of <u>Peace News</u> seriously, I am writing to complain about the blood stained tampon on the front of the March 4 issue.

It seems a singularly aggressive way to behave towards

> people who are not able to accept natural functions on the level of a cow lifting its tail to urinate in a field.
>
> Whether they should or not is not the point. They are the way society made them and should be accepted the way they are with respect and courtesy. Selling Peace News is difficult and time-consuming, and to put sellers in the position of affronting and embarrassing their customers in such a blatant manner is silly and unfair of you."

The horror of one's blood showing in public is conveyed by another story, which Jane Root heard from a woman friend:

> "I was wearing a pink dress and sitting on a train... when the man next to me whispered I should 'go and see to myself', pointing to the seat. I rushed to the bathroom and cried and cried. I still go cold thinking about it." (1982)

One can also, of course, see the secrecy enjoined by our culture in the euphemistic prose and imagery of advertising for sanitary wear. It is notable that the Independent Broadcasting Authority refuses to allow any advertising on television. I wrote to them for information on the background to this ban. There have been two recent experiments, allowing such advertisements to be transmitted in certain areas of the country, in 1979 and 1980: in the first case 380 and in the second 1000 letters of complaint were received. The IBA's market research found that about

30% of their sample found the advertising offensive.

> "The Authority concluded that as advertisements for sanitary protection appeared to offend a significant minority of the public, the category should not be accepted on television." (Personal communication from Yvonne Millwood, IBA Senior Advertising Control Officer, 5.9.1983).

I was fascinated to learn that among naturists, some of the women in any group will always be wearing bikini bottoms; they are menstruating. Even if menstruation could be managed with internal tampons, the women are expected to observe this practice (Odette Parry 1982). Nature can only be allowed so much freedom, evidently, so far and no further!

As we have seen, in the ambiguous social area of talk among friends, men felt that it would be unacceptable for them to raise the topic in conversation. But what of private life? What, indeed, <u>is</u> private life in this context? I will look first at family life generally, and then briefly at sexual relationships specifically.

<u>5.2.1 Family Life</u>

Only a few of the men I interviewed had heard their mothers mention menstruation - only one was told anything about it at home as a child. Most, too, had seen no physical evidence of its existence. Two of them were quite startled

by the thought that their mothers must have menstruated - it had not occurred to them until I asked them about it.

Of the six men who had sisters, three had heard no mention of their periods - and this includes one with <u>six</u> sisters. One of the men who had been aware of its existence recalls a negative reaction from his father:

> "... when (my sister) started menstruating, that was a real trauma in the house... It wasn't talked about, it wasn't, oh, sort of, X's had a period, in a joyful way, or a celebration of her having her first period or anything, it was all sort of... it was just a real chill atmosphere, you know, this means possibly confronting something to do with our bodies, everyone keep their heads down." (E 4)

This secrecy within the family appears to be reproduced to some extent in the next generation - the one man in my sample with daughters said that he thought they spoke only to their mother about it:

> "To the extent that they dealt with it, they dealt with it with X, although I think that's probably the only thing they dealt with with her and not dealt with me... aspects of their sexuality and so on are referred to me as much as or perhaps more, for all sorts of reasons..." (N 7)

In contrast to this consistent secrecy in all other relationships, the men in my sample would generally know

about it when a woman they had a sexual relationship with was menstruating. This knowledge in a sense marks off the heterosexual relationship from all other kinds of relationship between the sexes.

It would not be true to say, however, that no etiquette exists between lovers - in many ways the rules are very much the same. The woman may not presume that she will not be found offensive. As we will see when we look at sexuality in more detail (Chapter 8), the women continues to be held responsible for managing whatever the agreed boundaries for sex while she is menstruating may be.

Secrecy within the family affects women in various different ways. Much of the literature on menarche places tremendous emphasis on the role of the mother, and the mother's personal attitudes, in creating the girl's experience of her first period. However it is clear that mothers are expected to police the etiquette and to somehow at the same time protect their daughters from the effects of it: surely an impossible task. Elizabeth Roberts (1984) writes that mothers in the period of her study,1890 to 1940, made menstruation a taboo subject, that they "undouubtedly gave their daughters a feeling of repugnance about this natural function, as something which was shameful and to be hidden". But when she quotes an informant, Mrs. Stott, we can see the problems with blaming the mother:

> I always remember when I started she said 'Never let your brothers see this whatever you do.' She drummed

> it into me... and in those days things were a bit different to what they are today. You couldn't buy things to wash away down the toilet, they had to be washed, and she used to drum it into me, me being the only girl. No, she was most strict over anything like that. Strict over everything. She was a good mother." (p.17)

Rosemary Lee (1984) recounts her mother's menarche story:

> "When my mother was thirteen she came home from school convinced that, like her sister, she had a severe haemorrhage. She told her mother she was bleeding and was bundled out into the kitchen.
>
> 'How could you have mentioned that in front of your father?' Her mother found her a sanitary towel. 'It's your periods. Put that on. It'll go on until you're forty'. My mother thought this shameful bleeding would continue unabated and without reason for the next thirty years. She only discovered the full facts of life when in labour with my sister."

But such secrecy is not a thing in the past. Many girls nowadays are told that men must not know they are bleeding - many more, I suspect, like myself, do not even need to be told. It is easy enough to observe the concealment which older women practice. Several women have told me that their fathers scolded them if they left sanitary towels in the bathroom. One said that she used to do it to annoy him, because he used it as an issue to impose his authority - he would then tell her mother to tell her not to do it.

Whisnant and Zegans in their (1975) study of white middle-class American girls' attitudes, found that while 24 out of 25 girls who had experienced menarche had immediately told their mothers about it, only one had told her father. A somewhat larger number of pre-menarcheal girls said that they expected to tell their fathers about it. Generally Whisnant and Zegans note that the girls seemed to anticipate an openness which rarely occurred in the event. Fathers were told by mothers or not at all.

Neither does this problem cease after adolescence - when women have children of their own they are again confronted with these issues. After a talk I gave at a women's conference, a woman spoke about her anxiety about talking to her son about menstruation. She said that she felt that if she tried to give him information about it, she could imagine him going off to his friends and whispering about it and thinking it very funny. Other women in the group could offer no solutions.

The most problematic aspect of the concealment of menstruation from everyone, but particularly from those with whom one lives, is the difficulty of getting rid of the evidence: used sanitary wear. Rosemary Lee describes her own experiences, showing how she used different strategies at different times:

> "...The towels that compressed after the first hour and thereafter leaked into your pants, starching them to sandpaper; ... The disposal unit that signalled

> your exit from the loo with bouts of black smoke, or was stuffed full, leaving you with a reeking packet and nowhere to put it. The desperate fear that an unfastened towel was about to work its way out of the back of your pants. The awkward questions asked by boys who 'must not know'.
>
> ... I continued to cope until going to college digs, where there was no fire, boiler, or means of disposal other than the family dustbin under the dining room window. Crisis. I bought some Tampax, and with cold sweat running off me, and monumental efforts to relax, I made it in the third attempt, uninjured, and with the tampon in the right place.
>
> Since then I've changed to Lil-lets because their size makes them easier to conceal in the hand, or carry in a pocket. Why do I quail at openly carrying a towel or tampon? ... I can admit to you that I bleed, that I hurt, that the mechanisms and inhibitions around it repel me. I can cope with my body but not with Joe Public's view of it."

In Whisnant and Zegans interviews with pre-menarcheal girls, they found that "their concern did not centre about the psychological meaning of menstruation, why it takes place, or about the anatomy involved, but on the practical issue of 'What do I do when I get my period?'"

Suzanne Abraham (1983) reports on a survey of 40 Australian clerical workers aged 16 to 35 years. They were asked "Are

you/were you concerned that a pad could show when you are/were wearing one?" - 78% said that they were concerned. Again, the other option is to use tampons, and Abrahams finds that the vast majority of young women do come to use tampons.

We will discuss the significance of sanitary wear further in a later section. Before we move from our focus on the family, though, let us consider the distress caused if the girl learns her lesson too well. Patricia Pemberton Jones, in her short story "Tidal Wave" (1984) tells how when her anxiously-awaited first period finally arrives, she associates it with another coincidental new experience - sexual excitement. She cannot bring herself to tell her mother, "a distant elderly deity", sure that she would be angry.

> "So the weeks, then months, went on, always meaning to tell her tomorrow. I hid my stained knickers and the soiled towels in an old suitcase in my wardrobe. I didn't dare try and flush them away. When my underwear supply grew low I found a Saturday job in order to buy more. I learned all about bleaching sheets, and sometimes had to sleep on them wet because I couldn't dry them secretly.
>
> Summer came, my guilty secret in the plastic suitcase was bulging, it smelt horrible. Its presence seemed to fill my bedroom and dirty it, when I was bleeding this dirtiness seemed to cling to me and cover me."

When her mother finally found the suitcase she was indeed

very angry, and sent the girl to boarding school, on the theory that her "deceit" was the result of a lack of discipline.

I would be more ready to think of this account as fiction, or a special case, if I had not been told a very similar tale by a friend, who had been told something about menstruation, but not what to do with her used towels, in a house where the open fire was the focus of family life. She hid hers in a bedroom cupboard until the smell led her mother to find them.

5.2.2 Instruction in Etiquette

Like all etiquette, that relating to menstruation has to be taught. Sociological studies have looked at advertisements for sanitary products (Hazel Slavin 1981), and at the 'advice' literature produced by the same companies (Whisnant et al 1975). These last have the most explicit training function. Whisnant et al describe the ideological messages delivered to young girls, such as the emphasis on a close connection between womanhood and motherhood, but they also note the laying down of rules of behaviour, some of which they refer to as ritualistic in their "irrationality and dogmatism". Girls are exhorted to take special care in "grooming", to sleep more, eat "properly", drink water, do special exercises, and so forth. They are told especially, to "LIVE AS USUAL". Concealment is assumed as a virtue: "Your attitude and lack of good

grooming give it away", "It's absolutely impossible for anyone to know you are menstruating unless of course you act stupid about the whole thing".

Girls are to be shamed into not avoiding exercise or work during menstruation - pain is attributed to "other factors". Especially they must manage their emotions - they should "take their minds off themselves". As the authors point out, "a girl achieves a positive mental attitude in part by not attending to her own sensations."

There is tremendous emphasis on appearance. One of the first questions one of the leaflets proposes to answer is: "how to keep smiling everyday". Girls are told what they should feel - negative emotions are simply to be denied.

This material shows very clearly how menstrual etiquette is tied up with general prescriptions for feminine behaviour. Orientation to others, to one's appearance rather than to one's own feelings, are of the essence. Adult female self-respect is equated with calm secretiveness. Whisnant et al found that girls did in fact pay a great deal of attention to these materials, and in some cases followed instructions to the letter, for example about how often to change sanitary towels:

> "They stressed the importance of 'acting natural' and appearing 'cool', and agreed that menstruation ought to be kept secret and that symptoms could and should be concealed by will power."

Premenarcheal girls anticipated complying with the suggestions about what they would feel, for example that they would "act more ladylike".

But we cannot regard these materials as the source of menstrual etiquette. As Whisnant et al emphasise:

> "... their materials are readily available through schools, churches, scouting programs, and physicians, or are directly available to the girl or her mother by mail. A great deal of research and market testing goes into the preparation of these booklets, and they are revised frequently. Accordingly, the content is influenced by what is deemed acceptable to a broad spectrum of consumers, and its shortcomings, (which will be discussed) most likely reflect limitations imposed by that fact." (p.815)

We have looked thus far at what might be called the normal manifestations of menstrual etiquette. In circumstances where women's lives are under especially close control, these matters take on a different significance. Women in prison often complain that menstruation is used to punish or humiliate them, for example by the prison authority's withholding adequate sanitary wear. Any bodily function may become an arena of struggle in such circumstances, but menstruation lends itself also to specifically sexual degradation.

Teresa Thornhill (1985) describes the experience of a

Republican woman prisoner in Northern Ireland, during her interrogation by the Royal Ulster Constabulary, being made to sit in front of them all week, bleeding into the same pair of jeans.

Menstruation could also be used to make women special targets in Nazi concentration camps:

> "... many women in concentration camps ceased to menstruate. The rumour was that in concentration camps something was put in the food. But it is unlikely that this happened in places such as Treblinka (an extermination camp); the number of girls kept alive didn't warrant such precautions, and anyway this particular aspect of life only afforded the Ukranians and the SS one more opportunity for sadistic humour. There were, of course, no sanitary napkins, or even newspapers, and the girls used large leaves - burdock leaves if they could find them, to protect themselves. But any blood showing on a dress meant death; it was unaesthetic, and the SS were very keen on aesthetics." (Sereny 1977)

It is also said that the women who were forced into concentration camp brothels for use by the guards had to go to great lengths to conceal menstruation, and that if blood was detected, the woman would be killed.

I have concentrated my own work on ordinary everyday life, where concern with menstrual etiquette is generally at a low level of intensity. Why does it matter at all?

From a conservative position, White spells out nicely for me the importance of etiquette:

> "... many persons who do not understand the nature and functions of systems of etiquette are inclined to rail against them as being irrational, senseless and therefore unnecessary. They fail to understand that society must have some way of assuring itself that men will behave as men, women as women." (White 1959:226)

Using the example of a male student who arrives in class wearing lipstick or earrings, he emphasizes "the significant and important point: we do not know what he will do next" (White 1959). It is interesting that White uses examples from sexual politics to illustrate his general point, though he does not remark on this. Etiquette is clearly a particularly characteristic feature of the social hierarchy of the sexes - we take it for granted so much that it is difficult to see it for what it is.

While feminists have only rarely used the term etiquette (though see Rich 1977:57), they have in practice challenged the etiquette of menstruation in a number of ways. Some of the women anti-nuclear protesters at Greenham Common have tied tampons to the wire of the perimeter fence. A friend told me that her father had been so shocked by this that he could hardly speak about it. I found another interesting example in a recent review of Gloria Steinem's new book Outrageous acts and everyday rebellions:

> "Despite her book's title, Gloria Steinem's talent is not for outrage. That she should leave to Germaine Greer, who she remembers taunting a talk-show host by demanding as he laid down the law about monthly emotional changes and female unreliability, 'Can you tell me if I'm menstruating right now - or not?'"
> (Conrad 1984)

No-one is telling any stories about the outrageousness of the talk-show host, who raised the topic.

In her more subtle way, Posy Simmonds draws attention to the absurdity of the exact limits of menstrual etiquette among the liberal middle classes, in a cartoon titled "Taboo", see p.185. An intuitive connection is made between refusing the etiquette of menstruation and refusing male domination generally when feminists call a magazine Red Rag, a cartoon book and a local (Bradford) women's newsletter Heavy Periods, a theatre piece Female Trouble and a rock band PMT.

Since I have been working on menstruation, I have been to a number of evenings of feminist entertainment in different towns in Britain. As often as not some item in the programme refers to menstruation: a poem about bleeding into one's trendy white boiler suit in a restaurant; a skit where the period appears in vampire form to disrupt a woman's tidy life, and is held at bay with crossed tampons. In my own town one of these events included the demand being made of the all-female audience that those

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TABOO
Here are the Weber family at Wendy's sister's, celebrating Aunt Bunny's 80th birthday.....
It's cheese fondue, Aunt Bunny.....
Oh..how QUEER it looks
Where's Sophie got to?
I don't know
Here's Sophie...
Oh...there you are!
Whisper whisper!
What about a little mustard, Belinda?
No thanks
O, yes, I like cheese..I'm what you might call a "cheesy person"...
O good!
Fondue? Would that be a Hindoo sort of word?
It's french, Bunny...
..and this stuff's fine for drinking every day...
You MUST remember that two-piece... pink and white...
I do I do!
..so we thought we'd knock down that wall & make a playroom...
No, I haven't seen HER in YEARS!
Shall I get some pudding?
Can I get down?
Whisper
Now, have we time for Racing Demon before you go?
Bye Bye!
OK, Soph?
You SAID, Mum.. You SAID!!!
What?
..When we had our private TALK!... ..about it NOT being a curse.. you SAID it would be something to celebrate, when it started..something important! NOT something to ignore.. you said it was NORMAL and NATURAL!! WHY you so embarrassed?! Why'd you all whisper? why..?
Well, darling, it wasn't quite the right ti..
Well when is the right time!?
Eh?
© Posy Simmonds 1983

menstruating say so, and red ribbons being distributed for them to wear.

This attention to menstruation can be embarrassing to women, even among women - one is confronted with one's internalised conventionality. Just as men's jokes are not remotely amusing to women, I suspect that the point of these events, which can be satirical or serious, would be entirely lost on men. Making all our private embarrassments public is an attempt to exorcise the shame we carry, to bring to full consciousness also the extent to which we are still obliged to comply with etiquette in our daily lives.

One final note on etiquette. As I have mentioned in discussing the methodology of my study, I suffered a good deal of anxiety in deciding to interview men about menstruation. I had to be made conscious that it was etiquette rather than any logical obstacle which was preventing me from even really considering interviewing men, before I could decide to do so. Once made aware of this, I began to write about my feelings about it, hoping to keep a check on my reactions by consciously observing myself violating the rules. I wrote at first: "I would <u>expect</u> to be abused by men who had been asked to speak about menstruation" (Journal 16.2.1982). Seven months later (21.9.1982) I wrote that I was stuck about interviewing men. "This is partly due to reluctance to leave books aside, to put myself into an unpleasant social

situation." As I have said, in the event, my interviews were hardly ever really awkward or embarrassing.

I suspect that I was in a sense over-fearful as a result of having read the literature on menstruation, which emphasises an idea of men's intense fear lying behind the 'menstrual taboo'. Etiquette is after all something one can become aware of and choose to disregard - the consequences of doing so concern one's status in a culture which one may not, in any case, wish to maintain.

But I was influenced by analyses such as that of Paula Weideger, who says that the 'menstrual taboo' is

> "a means of keeping the fear of menstruating women under control. As soon as women succeed in overthrowing the taboo, these fears will no longer be comfortably contained. What is now covert may well become overt as male anxieties come to the surface." (1978:102)

She explicitly links the menstrual taboo with the threat of rape - or at least with women's "fears of reprisal" (p.123) - she slips somewhat in her writing between an acknowledgement of men's real actions to retain their power and an idea that women are unreasonably afraid. She concludes this passage as follows:

> "When the taboo is challenged, its beneficiaries also will be threatened - as will women who are not protected inside mental menstrual huts."

In retrospect it seems to me that while in one sense this analysis is correct in its linking of male power with menstrual etiquette, it can also in a sense reinforce that which it sets out to challenge. Men must be dealt with as individuals who are in control of their actions as well as being seen as members of a group who must be expected to act to retain their power.

Social rules are within the power of human beings to change - but if they are analysed as resulting from deep unknowable psychic horrors rather than plain politics, they are made to seem inevitable, <u>beyond</u> change.

CHAPTER 6

"A SICK JOKE": MALE CULTURE ON MENSTRUATION

What do men think about menstruation? Chapter 4 has presented some parts of the data I collected from men: the points at which I could relate what the men had said to women's concerns. But what men think about menstruation is not consistent from one social setting to another - my interviews uncovered a whole set of ideas, mainly in joke form, which exist among men and which are not on the whole repeated in interactions with women.

I began my research with a sense that I did not have all the information I needed to make sense of my feelings about menstruation. The data in this chapter not only throws light upon men's experiences in relation to menstruation but also upon women's. Women are interested in what men feel about menstruation, understanding at some level that their experience is conditioned by men's - much of the writing on the subject however, implies that what we don't know about men's consciousness is unknowable, existing at a deep, perhaps unconscious, level. What my data shows is that there is much that is perfectly obvious to many men, but which male groups ensure is kept from women. Its absence from the 'literature' is part of this same process.

In my interviews I took a life-history approach, asking the men to recall how menstruation had entered their

consciousness as children and how it had changed subsequently. Therefore the data I have falls into two sets - childhood and adult - however these two both interact together and share common themes.

6.1 BOYHOOD

About half the men in my sample reported boys at school joking about menstruation, the most common phrase mentioned being "jam-rag" (or its variants "jam sandwich", "jam roll"): terms for sanitary towels. Some, echoing the stories in Mahoney and Prendergast (see Chapter 4.1) of girls being teased about periods, reported that:

> "For years and years, I'm not the only person I'm sure, we used to... kids used to call, used to taunt girls, we used to say 'well, where's your jammy rags?' and things like that...() people never knew what it was until I was older, but it's one of the things you just say ... a way of getting at girls was to do that." (I 2)

This knowing/not knowing is shown also in this sequence:

> SL: Can you remember when you first learnt that there was such a thing as menstruation?
>
> M: No. I can't.
>
> SL: But at some point you knew?
>
> M: At some point yes.
>
> SL: Do you remember a stage of knowing there was something, but not what it was?

M: Um, I don't... it's very difficult to say... only in the sort of schoolboy sense, you know, adolescent, schoolboy (unclear) reference to girls, periods, menstruation, that kind of thing, but not in any serious way. (M 1)

In some schools, the boys would make this an issue as a tactic in a dispute with the authorities.

"... then I suppose the only other instances is from recognising this is what happens to girls when they don't come to school, and that kind of thing () And why girls are let off doing certain things like PE and that, or, you know, certain allowances were made, and I think... Boys at school used to think it was unfair, ()

A lot of it is connected with girls crying, I think, premenstrual tension I suppose, but a lot of it was to do with.. if girls cry they get let off, get allowed to do certain things and... like we used to have to read out of books, in the English lesson, and girls used to be let off reading out a passage, taking a part, if they didn't want to, if they weren't in the mood for that kind of thing, but the boys were always pushed to do it. I suppose that's connected with other things as well, but...(I 1)

"there was a big row at school about whether you could bring your bag, certain kinds of bag to school, and it was really telling the boys what they could bring, bring sports bags and nothing else, and the girls were let off this, and there was a spate of the boys

saying, oh, you know, taunting the girls about what they've got in their bags, and grabbing bags off them, and things like that, just to have a look." (I 3)

Another theme relating to menstruation is of a general "put down" that "she's on", referring to ideas about hormones altering women's behaviour. One man said that he thought the girls at his school used this about each other: certainly the boys said it about girls (G).

More men only remembered it being talked about among boys, not used against girls directly (several had gone to boys-only schools). In that context it would be referred to "in the kind of dirty joke manner" (M2). One man referred to "jam rag" being used as a term of abuse to another boy, meaning "you prat" (F).

"A lot of men, a lot of the boys, used to have jokes, a pattern, a section of jokes about menstruation, like 'sunny periods' and all sorts of connotations about, um, there was a whole sort of part of the vocabulary of, like, jokes which were menstrual jokes, and about women, about women's blood, in a really sort of... I can't remember a lot of them, but there was one like.. jokes on the word period, sort of metaphors and things of the word period.

SL: Would they say that to the girls?

E: No that would be boys' jokes. (E 8)

E: ... But I can't really remember men's jokes being geared to persecuting one girl in particular, it was

> more sort of 'it's us and them, and they have periods, so we've got a few jokes about that sort of thing'. Bit like Irish, Pakistanis..." (E 9)

Other men said that menstruation was not joked about in their schools:

> "... things like sex were regarded as fun, as things to joke about, but something like menstruation wasn't. It was considered taboo by us... I don't know how far - I mean I certainly didn't understand it, and I don't know how far people that I went to school with understood it. Noboby was quite sure enough to make a joke about it, if you know what I mean, because nobody quite knew what it was." (J 2)
>
> "No... you see one of the things... having periods was always something that wasn't very nice, basically, and people didn't tend to mention it, even young boys, very rarely would it come up." (K 4)

Girls also use slang and make jokes about periods - but I would argue that even the same words have a rather different meaning in female mouths. I certainly wouldn't want to imply that taking a solemn attitude to periods would do girls any good!

Laughing at one's own bodily functions and the inconveniences they bring with them is a healthy sign and is quite different from the 'them and us' joking of boys. That the man quoted above did not even know what was referred to by "jammy rags", but knew that it was something

he could say to "get at girls", demonstrates my point. He understood the sexual politics without understanding the subject matter.

I was very interested to find that this same phenomenon is reported by Marilyn Strathern in relation to the people of Mount Hagen, New Guinea. They regard menstrual blood as poisonous, and the men say it is disgusting, smelly. Small boys are told that when their mothers are menstruating, it is as if they are smeared with faeces, or have poison on their bodies. Children make this association of dirt and danger with women before they know the facts of menstruation. Men relate not having known that it was because of bleeding that women had to go into seclusion until they reached adulthood (1972:173).

The men's group discussion explores the differences in their memories further:

> "- what about at school then... there were some whispers down the corridor at home, which didn't particularly give me any sense of, er, nastiness or uncleanliness... but somewhere along the way obviously, as well as reading these articles about Hells Angels, I obviously picked up something which allowed me to enter into the sort of school thing of ridiculing and joking, and er, really being very abusive about women. You know, the jamrag... is it called jamrag? yeah
>
> - yeah

- that sort of term, that came from school, didn't it? Again I don't remember much about... ()

- I remember finding a sanitary towel occasionally in the woods, and things like that, and the jokes that were made about it

- I don't remember that - it was a boys' school

- no

- I vaguely remember jokes about jamrags that I didn't understand but...

- they were very few, I mean it was pretty bad taste joking actually... a boys school... a couple of allusions, not much. I think on the whole the taboo was pretty solid. And a joke about jamrags was breaking the taboo if anything, and that was in bad taste on the whole, most people didn't do it. One or two jokers who made jokes about anything in bad taste that they could possibly think of, would come out with those jokes, but then they'd come out with the most bad taste jokes on anything you'd care to think of anyway (laughter)

- mm, yes I remember those characters. I found it quite distasteful, I must have had the taboo quite strongly. (laughter)

- but, mm, much to Sophie's disappointment I'm afraid, I don't remember much discussion of it at my school. I had an all-male education of course, even including university really. I mean it very rarely surfaced as a matter for joke or discussion...

- you're reminding me now, when it was mentioned, it

> was, pretty much frowned upon. I didn't go to a posh school or anything like that, but even there it wasn't something that was particularly widely joked about at all. There was a sort of hidden quietness about it... (pp 8/9)

This idea of bad taste recurs in the data about adult men. One man remarks that "I wouldn't have thought that was primarily the source of most dirty jokes" (M2), which is a point also made about adult men's joking. This continuity is further emphasised as one man mentions the central theme of adult joking about periods as a memory from school:

> "... the actual idea, at first, wasn't very attractive... that's what you're told, isn't it? I mean that's the sort of thing you are told. I mean, yeah, looking back at school, that's the kind of jokes you would make, if you ever sort of managed to get off with some girl it would be just your luck that she'd be having her period or whatever. So yeah, I mean, that idea was definitely there, not that it was physically impossible, but just, like, you know, just that it was kind of... almost a bit freaky, I suppose. " (D 3/4)

Equally the same man says that recently he hasn't heard such joking but

> "I suppose at university blokes were still kind of making those jokes, still come out with really crude terms like jamrags and things. But not since then." (D 5)

The following conversation in the men's group shows how adult male culture may be transmitted to younger males:

"- the first memory I've got, the first thing... about actually talking about menstruating was, I think it was being aware of these rituals that Hells Angels went through. Do you remember

- yes

- ... reading stuff like that? There was a big

- the wings thing?

- yes right, and that, the thing was that they were, all these Hells Angels got their wings by various things like you know pissing on their jeans until they stood up, and they're so dirty... and one of them was having sex with a woman who was menstruating. Do you remember that?

- yes

- I definitely remember that as being one of the first times I was really aware. And it was in that sense, one of my very earliest memories, were very much linked up with, it was some strange, er, almost perverse ritual. You know, sex and menstruation were really a bad thing, that bad people did, (laughs) in order to get accepted in a really heavy group of people. ()

- ... I can remember at school, reading those books, and remembering, and presumably what you were supposed to do was to share the horror of the author in writing about this, and I can remember thinking, gosh, ugh, no, you know

- my god yeah

- no way

()

- Mm. The first time I had sex with a woman when she was menstruating I definitely remember feeling, thinking back to these articles about the Hells Angels. Absolutely definitely. I mean not, I hope not in any sort of conquering,...().. It was almost as if I'd sort of knocked down one more taboo. I felt a bit cocksure of myself... (Group pp 4/5)

6.2 ADULT MEN: SEXUAL ACCESS

Rather more than half of the men I interviewed had heard adult men joking about menstruation. This had occurred in a variety of settings, from workplaces (in heavy industry but also among scientific workers) to male leisure situations such as football changing rooms. One man gave a lengthy account of passing from one male group to another:

"... in my adolescent years there was always jokes about women having periods, and knowing you might as well stay clear of them at that time of the month because there's no point normally, you know. Because you can't do anything (laughs) you know. And that, I suppose, it went through a long, you know a long age range, right from, I suppose... what? 16, 17 right up until mid 20s and I think even now men in general do think of, you know, make jokes about, you know.

SL: What's it about?

H: I'm thinking of the expression 'rags', you know, 'having the rags up her' is a very common phrase. And so, you know, you'll get nowhere with her she's got the rags up her. It's all to do with sort of having sex with them...

SL: not being able to have sex with them...

H: Which is not, in their thoughts, in our thoughts, it's about not being able to have sex with them when they're menstruating, therefore there's no point in having any relationships with them (laughs). ()

H: ... and at that time of the month they can't have sex so therefore... you look elsewhere.

SL: So you've heard that from men, over the years in all kinds of...?

H: yeah

SL: at work

H: Yes

Yeah. Probably not so much recently but there again I haven't worked... for a long time. The last sort of job where I can remember it happening was probably ten years ago where the boss was, he had a particular sort of hang up about it. He really was a bit wierd. He still is. ()

SL: So what does he say?

H: ... he's a married man but in a hospital situation where there are a lot of young girls around, young nurses, young women, who are eligible, if you like, and it's funny, but in the hospital where we worked,

and he still works, there was a toilet - I used to work in the laboratories - there was a female toilet just outside the lab so we could always see the women going to the toilet and he actually used to time them and if they were taking a long time he used to say 'Oh well they've got the rags up, there's no point in chatting her up'... It's like trying to impress people by being that wierd, I don't know... There are a lot of jokes that go around about women who are menstruating. Not jokes but... sort of perversions, if you like. I remember... er, this particular guy, and the group of us at the time were very... almost turned on by the fact of suddenly being... menstruating. And the fact that it's a bit messy, you know if you have sex then there's blood everywhere, you know that sort of thing, it almost became... sensual. And there was this thing about grabbing hold of the tampon string with your teeth and dragging it out. () (laughs) ()
... the sort of... er, almost nauseous feeling about making love and having oral sex when someone's menstruating... () And it was really sort of getting high on... on the perverted, well, trying to make sex during menstruation look perverted and therefore get high on it. ()

SL: would he talk about his wife like this?()

H: O yeah. If the wife's menstruating then he's obliged to, er well there are two things () One he's obliged to, I mean I'm particularly thinking about this guy but it is because he's a very typical

> example I think. A man whose wife is menstruating is either obliged to go into this... er sort of nauseous act of making love and having sex in that taboo situation, or he's got to look somewhere else for sex, er, yes."(H 4-6)

This sort of joking seems to be the most common type. One man said he thought he wasn't representative of men generally because:

> "I think a lot of men will use it as a derogatory term... from previous experience, they'll say 'well she was fucking having her period, wasn't she?' meaning they didn't have sex. 'She wasn't feeling very well', as though she did it on purpose to spite him or something. A lot of men think in those terms ..." (G 5)

Another echoes the point made by H:

> "When I was younger, you know, you used to say 'oh, hard luck', kind of thing (laughs) 'picked the wrong one', that kind of thing (laughs)" (I 6)

Women are useful only for sex, and therefore are interchangeable, disposable. Christobel Pankhurst called this the doctrine of sex slavery: "That woman is sex and beyond that nothing" (1913).

It is spelt out in the following account, from a man who had worked on an all-male shop floor in an engineering firm.

"... it was all men there, it was a much more divorced reality... the women were at home doing the cooking, and they were there, so they'd talk about sexual conquests if they had any, or they'd talk about how inadequate their wives were if they didn't. And that's where I first got sort of experience of pornography, and the way men make sex out to be dirty, and associate sex with violence, and domination, that to have sex, there was some sort of suffering involved and it was mainly the woman that did all the suffering and the man that did all the raping. I can remember a lot of rape fantasy going on in the pornography and in men's conversations when I was working there..." (E 9/10)

"SL: in the pornography, was there any reference to menstruation?

E: No, that's totally unerotic in male conceptions. Yeah, I mean the idea of that... you know? It's just a turn off, for men. The jokes that men make about it are sort of like sick jokes you'd make, about Thalidomide dogs being taken for a drag, or something, the same sort of inference that it's a sick joke, you know, menstruation is a sick business, you know.()

SL: it isn't exactly that the women are sick is it?

E: No, it's more like women, in a group of human beings, are redundant, when they're thought about in association with menstruation. That women and menstruation aren't erotic, you know, you don't sort of talk about them to stimulate a conversation, like.

I can remember one conversation I had with a good friend of mine, and I always felt like he was different from the norm, like a lot of men, because he didn't used to make really sick jokes about women, and he didn't make racist jokes, and he was quite a gentle man (). He said to me one day, that he knew this bloke, a friend of his, and he was in the same position as me, he had friends in different cultural circles like, he knew bikers, that were real sort of lads, and he knew men who stayed at home and played chess and he said that he knew of a young guy, he said he knew that he made love with his girlfriend, and he said he was a really dirty little fucker, because she was on, having a period, and he just pulled the Tampax out, and they made love, and like the idea that he could do that, and not be sort of turned off, still get a erection, meant that he was so dirty ... (laughs)... associations that, god, you'd have to be a real mental case to be able to do that. Like, he's mad, but you know men say, 'he's a real nutcase', when it can be a quite an endearing thing, you know.

He did used to get down to the nitty gritty of things, the actual talking about tampax and periods, but it's such a sort of violent imagery that goes with it, connotations with sickness, and violence..." (E 14)

In his book Learning to Labour. Paul Willis reports a sequence of joking talk among a group of working-class "lads" at a boys' secondary modern school. The essence, he

says, of their joking is that it disparages another boy:

> "(A group of 'lads' during breaktime)
>
> Eddie: X gets his missus to hold his prick, while he has a piss (laughter)
>
> Will: Ask him who wipes his arse (laughter)
>
> Spike: The dirty bastard... I bet he changes her fucking rags for her.
>
> Sparksy: With his teeth! (more laughter)" (1977:33)

Julian Wood has also studied 'boys' sex talk', among some 'disruptive' London boys and found that "the reproductive and excremental aspects of the female body were constantly referred to by the boys in that fixated-disgusted tone edged with nervousness and surrounded by giggling" (p.22) In analysing the sexism of this kind of talk, one aspect he describes is that "Women are presumed to exist primarily in and through their bodies as opposed to their whole selves. These bodies are there to provide pleasure for men but, at the same time, these bodies are alien (to men) and therefore wierd, dirty, and even sinister." (1983:9)

The ambiguity about whether or not sex during periods is desirable for men should not be allowed to obscure the central message of all these 'jokes', which is about control. In this world, if sex is to take place, the man pulls the tampon out, he relates only to the women's vagina, not to her as a person with her own feelings.

There is an accusation within much of this talk that women

'use' menstruation - one man told me about this in relation to menstrual pain:

> "I can remember feeling irritated, feeling annoyed, feeling there was nothing... that I didn't have any control over the situation, and that it was something that women used to exert control." (A 7)

When I first applied to universities to do this research, I had one interview at a sociology department where no women held permanent posts. I was interviewed by five men and one woman from another department, brought in for the occasion. One of the men suggested to me then that something I should look at in my research would be "how women use it".

Women are, I think, felt to be likely to want to avoid work as well as sex. The consequences of this for how menstrual pain is seen are discussed at greater length in Chapter 10. Interestingly, women are in one sense held to be using menstruation to control men, indeed almost to be in control of menstruation itself, while at the same time they are seen as controlled by it.

The other major theme of male talk in addition to the pre-occupation with sanitary towels and sexual access, is that women are unreliable, out of control, at 'that time of the month'. I will discuss this more fully elsewhere in the context also of medical ideas about 'premenstrual tension' and menstrual cycle-related mood change generally. It seems

to be so, though, that male groups may support a particular set of ideas on this. One account is explicit about this, that "it was not discussed with the women" (H 6). Another shows how one set of ideas runs into another. He has just been discussing jokes about jamrags, and has said that he hears less of this now. I asked:

> "Do you think that's because you've got different friends, or because it's an adolescent thing?
>
> D: I think it's because I've got different friends. Still get people, sometimes at work and things, who just seem very intolerant of... I don't think they actually know that women are having a period or anything, it's like I said before, women don't tend to say, but you do get men who kind of, if a women comes out with some sort of, if someone seems a bit on edge or uptight, they'd sort of start saying she must be having her period, and stuff like that. Not actually joking about it, just saying 'Oh my god, you know, bloody women, having periods and things, you know'... But no, the joking bit seems to have gone out, I think that is because I've got different friends. I'm sure if, like I've had summer jobs and things, on building sites and stuff like that, the same sort of thing goes on there." (D5)

A man who said he had not heard adult men speak about menstruation produced this statement of what he might expect to hear:

> "No, I mean, I can trade in stereotypes a bit, but I'm not sure I've actually heard them used... about

> women's behaviour being in some way either stigmatised, or justified or excused because... Being touchy, or inward-looking, or whatever, but I'm not sure I've actually heard it done. I don't think so. Not that I remember, oddly enough." (C7)

6.3 SOME AMERICAN DATA

Although there has been very little research of any sort done on men's talk about menstruation, there is some evidence that my data is not likely to be untypical of Western cultures.

As we have seen in Chapter 4, some studies have been done on language relating to menstruation, and in her article "American Menstrual Euphemisms" Virginia L. Ernster looks at the terms American men use for menstruation. The terms they use parallel the British ones in many ways, the most common one being "on the rag". Informants explained several different ways in which this term might be used, including as a derogatory term to other males. If said to another male, it might imply that his being angry or upset was due to his girlfriend being menstruating and his not having sexual access to her. Or it might simply be an analogy: "if used in reference to a guy, it is highly insulting since you are saying that his moodiness is like that of a girl with menstrual cramps" (1975:11). Only one other set of euphemisms was mentioned more than once, this

was "flying the flag" and its variants "flying Baker" (refers to a Navy warning flag), "The red flag is up" or "riding the flag". Other terms contributed by males that Ernster mentions are: "Too wet to plow", "riding the cotton pony", "manhole cover" and "coyote sandwich". These last terms very clearly refer to lack of sexual access to the woman, as do all the terms mentioned, although "on the rag" seems to have stronger connotations of being "high-strung", irritable, moody.

The preoccupations with sexual access and emotional instability are the same as those reported by my sample. Ernster writes that among men "menstrual euphemisms tend to have sexual and derogatory connotations". There is a common term of abuse in West Indian slang 'tor ass clot' or 'ras claat', from 'your arse cloth' - yet another reference to sanitary towels.

Some menstrual 'jokes' are recounted in G. Legman's book The Rationale of the Dirty Joke (1969). Legman fails to distance himself from the joke-tellers he analyses, and we may take his work as more 'of' than 'about' male culture. He categorises these jokes within a section entitled "Sex Hate" as dealing with "Menstruation and other Rejections" and under "Displaced Aggressions".

One joke he reports emphasises the impact upon men of lack of sexual access to their wives during periods:

"A super-salesman is being watched from behind the

> door by the territorial manager, who is stupefied to see the salesman run up a customer's request for a fishing rod into a whole fishing kit, hip boots and hunting clothes, an outdoor barbecue set, a new automobile, cub airplane ('for those whoppers in Canada') and a country home to match. 'How were you able to do it?' asks the manager, when the sucker has gone. 'Oh, I knew he was in the right frame of mind,' says the super-salesman calmly. 'He originally didn't even want the fishing pole. He just came in to buy a box of Kotex for his wife.'" (Calif. 1952)

In another case, it is Legman's own comment which reinforces my analysis - that he himself perceives references to menstruation as 'sick':

> "The following burlesque skit was seen in a Florida nightclub, 1946: 'The master-of-ceremonies' stooge pretends to be drunk and confides that there is a slot-machine in the ladies' toilet. "Sure there is", he insists, when the master-of-ceremonies disagrees: "where do you think I got this collar for my tux?" (Pulls out a woman's Kotex pad and hangs it around his neck, bringing down the house. Then as topper:) "Well, maybe it isn't a collar. I could use it as a simonizing rag for my car, except for these two pins." (Dangles the pad and belt-pins before the audience.) "I only went for cigarettes anyway."'
>
> People who think that 'sick humour', or shocker nightclub acts began with Lenny Bruce in the 1960s have never been around."

Two jokes on the same sort of theme place menstruation within the context of the rapist mentality - it is seen as provocation to violence:

> "A bride refuses to let her husband consummate their marriage the first night because she is menstruating. The second night she has nervous diarrhea (or a head-cold). The third night he appears at her beside in hip-boots and a raincoat, carrying a storm lantern, and announces 'Mud or blood, shit or flood, McClanahan rides tonight!" (Idaho 1942)
>
> "A man takes his girl out for a buggy ride. He drops the reins and begins to hug and kiss her, but she refuses, saying that she is menstruating. 'You know, there's another way you can satisfy me', he says, but she explains that she has piles. He drives a little further, stops the horse, gets out, picks up a rock, gets back in and says, 'Now just you tell me that you got lockjaw, and I'll crush your skull!'" (pp 278,279)

6.4 PORNOGRAPHY

There are levels of male culture where menstruation is not even mentioned. Andrea Dworkin considers the derivation of the word pornography:

> "The word pornography does not have any other meaning than the one cited here, the graphic depiction of the lowest whores. Whores exist to serve men sexually. Whores exist only within a framework of male sexual

> domination. Indeed, outside that framework the notion of whores would be absurd and the usage of women as whores would be impossible." (1979:200)
>
> "The valuation of women in pornography is a secondary theme in that the degradation of women exists in order to postulate, exercise, and celebrate male power. Male power, in degrading women, is first concerned with itself, its perpetuation, expansion, intensification, and elevation." (p.25)

Dworkin writes to me (1982: personal communication) that "There is no doubt that there is a general refusal to show menstruation - I don't know why" and further:

> "The only specific reference (that I can remember) that I found in the pornography I read to menstruation was in Sade's 120 Days of Sodom. As I remember, somewhere towards the end (after a thousand or so pages of unmitigated atrocity), Sade's imagination for horror spent, he mentions menstruating women and blacks. There is in pornography a lot of slicing of female genitals - obvious references to menstruation, I think, though in the peculiar code of the woman hater; there is also one special kind of lesbian photo-layout that recurs constantly, which is two women smearing paint all over each other - at first I couldn't figure out how this was a sexual act in any sense (let alone one so common that porn. mag after porn. mag has it represented) but then came upon a comment from Freud to Jung that menstrual blood represented excrement, after which the endless smearing of paint seemed obvious -

> paint representing menstrual blood (woman with woman equals essence of woman) representing filth. The other imagery related to menstruation in pornography is simply the enormous overload of instruments near, around, or in the vagina that are knife-like (vagina means sheath). Larry Flynt, publisher of Hustler, has published at least one picture of supposedly female genitals overflowing with pus."

Elaine and English Showalter also mention Sade's reference to menstruation as notable for its restraint and as unusual among Victorian pornographers (1972). Note that Sade mentions menstruation and Blacks at the same time. In my own memory of hearing, as a young girl, the story about the Hells Angels' initiation rituals which the men's group mentions, there was this same connection made. The men won 'red wings' by having sex with a menstruating woman, and 'black wings' for having sex with a Black woman. When I write 'having sex' I am aware that rape is quite likely what is actually meant. This kind of male discourse makes no distinction between the two, for the woman's point of view is irrelevant. The element of pollution-belief, of disgust, which forms part of white racism, appears to be sexualised into a form which has something in common with the male view of menstruating 'women', seen presumably as menstruating white women.

It looks then, as if menstruation has no place in the pure male-centred world of pornographic 'sex'. It cannot be recruited to enhance male power. The joking among men may

therefore police the periphery: control male anxiety (and any real threat from women) that women's bodies as they actually are might violate the men's fantasy world. We might see this as in a sense a low level of male culture, where the tacky realities of life meet pure male fantasy. We shall see in Chapter 12 how obscenity is used by men to bully women trying to raise the issue of taxation of sanitary wear in the public sphere, a good example of how the periphery is policed to maintain the masculine purity of the body politic. A report on media and sexism in Spare Rib (O'Sullivan 1984) mentions another interesting case. It quotes an article in the printworkers' magazine Print (Feb. 1984) which used typographical errors in anti-women obscenity. The piece is titled "Study groups to aid women". It reads:

> "The WEA over the last few years has made women's studies a priority. These curses are available throughout the cuntry, and are aimed at questioning the role that women are expected to play in society."

To summarise the messages male culture conveys about menstruation. Women's inferiority to men lies at the back of it all, so much taken for granted that it need not be spelt out. Two specific aspects of this are (a) that women's genitals are disgusting/produce disgusting substances (this is expressed in the attention to sanitary towels), and (b) that women are ruled by their hormones. Menstruation is also sexualised - it is most often joked about as if related to men, to heterosexuality. This

culture sees women's bodies as existing to serve male sexual desires - menstruation is dealt with as female resistance, justifying either violation or the man going elsewhere for sex. Menstruation is thus used to express the idea that women are interchangeable - if they are sexually useless to a man, they may as well not exist. There is nothing erotic (as in sensual) about this joking - insofar as it is sexual, the sexuality is entirely about power and control.

The male culture portrays men as absolutely in control of sex with women. When it is confronted with menstruation, which has nothing essentially to do with men or sex, it perceives this internal female phenomenon as somehow threatening to male power. Therefore male joking attempts to bring menstruation within the arena of sexuality - under male-centred heterosexual control.

Sanitary towels seem to crystallise in one idea everything that men find offensive about menstruation. Since they have nothing whatever to do with men, they seem to symbolise women out of control to men. A friend recently described to me having seen that day a group of young boys run through Boots the Chemists' supermarket in Lancaster, spitting on the packets of sanitary towels as they went.

6.5 MUST WE LISTEN?

But why should we concern ourselves with this? Why is

joking among men important to women? Conspiracy theory tends to be used only as a term of abuse in sociology, but the fact remains that there exist in our society a whole spectrum of men-only groupings which exclude women and within which male supremacist ideology is unchallenged. This must affect relations between the sexes, and if we are to understand the gender order we must look at every part of the society, not just those which are easily made available to our eyes.

Mary Daly calls this male talk "spooking from the locker room". She writes that:

> ".. most of the time this language is used in all-male environments. Yet it is the common male view of all women and, although most women do not hear it directly, we receive the message in a muted way. It is conveyed through silences, sneers, jeers, excessive politeness, paternalistic praise and disapproval, aggressive physical contact (an arm around the shoulder, a pat on the behind), invasive stares. Since women often do not <u>hear</u> the messages of obscenity directly, we are spooked. For the invasive presence and the intent are both audible and inaudible, visible and invisible.
>
> Moreover, women are conditioned to pretend not to hear/see the constant and violent bombardments of obscenity, for we have been taught the lesson that since verbal violence is a 'substitute' for physical assault, we should be grateful for such seemingly mild manifest-

> ations of misogynism. Thus, spooking from the locker room, the unacknowledged noise of omnipresent male obscenities, constitute the 'background music' which continually confuses and fragments consciousness. Exorcising this invasive presence requires acknowledging its existence and refusing to shuffle. This has the effect of bringing the spookers out into the open." (1978:323)

Paradoxically, Legman comes up with the same sort of analysis. He sees dirty jokes as a sort of "verbal rape" - "a vocal and inescapable sexual relationship with other persons of the desired sex". He suggests that such joking also has a secondary function "to absorb and control anxiety". (pp 13,14).

Women anthropologists who have studied life in English villages have found this sort of behaviour important in maintaining male domination at the local level. Imray and Middleton (1983) write about Audrey Middleton's experience when she violated the rules about a woman's place in the village cricket club and challenged the men's authority. She was at once subject to obscene joking, placing her as "an object to be screwed". Ann Whitehead (1976) witnessed pub life in a Herefordshire village which hinged around men vying for superiority in constant joking and teasing. She observed that women were used as "counters in joking currency" (p.192), having no existence in that culture as human individuals. She reports that women appear in the

joking in at least three ways: firstly there is obscene, vulgar language; secondly there are contemptuous and degrading stereotypes of women, part of the ideology of sex differences; thirdly jokes are sometimes concerned with control over specific wives. We can see that each of these three types of reference appear in the range of male talk about menstruation - there are obscenities, "jam rag", "having the rags up her"; there are stereotypes of female unreliability and emotionality; and there is concern over control of individual women, in this case focusing on the issue of sexual service from menstruating women.

Whitehead writes that "It is difficult for men to treat their relationships with wives as relationships with people when wives are used as objects in another arena." (p.195). We may then consider what effect male joking about menstruation has upon men's individual relationships with women, especially given how difficult it is for women to initiate discussion with men on this subject.

So what is the nature of these male groups, this male culture? Where and when do they tend to occur, how can we characterise them? As a woman, I cannot answer these questions properly, for my access to the answers is too limited. I feel some embarrassment in presenting the data in this chapter for I know it to be incomplete, but am unable (or perhaps unwilling) to complete it. No man I have spoken to about this has denied knowledge of it - none has volunteered to tell me anything more. One or two have

suggested that there is "worse than that" - in such a tone that I have not pressed them for details. There is some absurdity in my situation - one of a minority of women in a social science profession dominated by men striving by roundabout means to discover aspects of 'our' culture which are common knowledge among men.

During my work I was often made aware that I was asking to be told things women are not meant to hear. Two men themselves became aware of this. One said at one point "Sorry I'm being so upfront about it. Do you find that offensive?" (E 14), and the other also almost apologised for what he told me: "I have to be frank." (H 6). These were the two men quoted above who gave me the fullest accounts of male culture. I noticed that several of the other men said that while they had heard such talk, they could not remember jokes or words they'd heard used. This further reinforced my impression that these are sexual insults which are meant to be kept among men. The telling of these created unease within the interviews. Several of the men told me quite personal details about their sexual experiences, and, for instance, their feelings about blood - but this did not create the same kind of awkwardness. One responded to my prompting him to tell me more detail like this: "Yes. Not sure if we can talk further about that. I don't know what sort of area you're interested..." (M 7).

When I was asking about joking among men, several of them would refer to "the sort of things boys say", "in the

schoolboy sense", or just say "you know", appealing to a commonsense knowledge that I did not have, and one man flatly refused to spell it out for me. I came away with the general impression that what they were ashamed of (if shame is the right word) was not their personal feelings, but their participation in male groups which talk about women in this way.

Some men reflected further about how they saw their participation in such groups, relating this to their relationships with women:

> "Again I was fairly conservative, and I never ever talked to anybody else about our sexual relationship () Now in the last few years, obviously I would, and think it was rather stupid that I didn't... I might sort of go along with all sorts of sexist remarks, dirty jokes, the whole gambit, without, particularly thinking there was anything terribly wrong with it, but when it came to our own sexual relationship, then that was just not on. And therefore given that that was the code I operated by, I think it's unlikely that I would ever have talked to anybody about it... I don't remember." (N 3)

> "Yeah because at the same time as realising menstruation wasn't a bad thing, I began to stop being involved in those sort of situations where those sort of jokes would be told, so I never really did communicate to women that those jokes were being made

about them... because at the same time as not wanting to be offensive, or hurtful about it,... but I mean my relationship with X is close enough for us to be able to talk about things like that, say, oh, the boys at school used to say so and so... but I never really did, I don't think I communicated to her what they really were." (E 9)

Not all male groups discuss menstruation or for that matter anything to do with women. For instance boys in single-sex schools seemed to joke about such things far less than groups of boys in mixed schools. And in adult life to it would seem that male groups which co-exist closely with mixed-sex situations are the most actively unpleasant about women.

The essential point seems to be that the men are moving individually between the family where they have contact with women, and the male group, whether it is a work group or a leisure one. One man describes how this relationship works in one situation:

"But I think it's very much connected with bravado... you know, it really is tied up to that. And therefore references to women become commonplace, but it's as sexual objects... you know... Well I play football Sunday mornings, so 'what were you doing last night?' kind of discussion, they predominate... and even at a sort of mildly serious level, a serious joke, no sex before the game kind of discussion, so feeling

(unclear) sophisticated comment, I suppose, rather than just the crude thing, club rule. Um I don't think within that there is a great deal of discussion about menstruation, I think there's reference to periods, I wouldn't exaggerate it... Because it's not, it doesn't seem to be the most attractive way of expressing it..." (M 8)

Many of the men who told me about jokes about menstruation emphasised that menstruation was not a central topic of such joking. What is central is 'sex' - meaning the sexual degradation of women.

However this kind of male talk must certainly be partly responsible for men's attitudes to menstrual etiquette between women and men. If the male culture regards menstruation as purely discrediting, entirely disgusting, then it is only to be expected that well-intentioned men will tend to avoid talk with women about it, assuming that they might easily give offense. Young girls can grow up hearing no mention of menstruation, discovering the 'taboo' when they discover menstruation itself. Young boys may have the same experience, but they are just as likely to grow up hearing talk about it which conveys men's belief in the inferiority of women, rather than any 'information' on the physical facts of menstruation. The silences and the obscenities are intimately connected.

Although I have often referred to 'male culture' in a

general way, I want to make it very clear that my evidence relates to white English present-day culture specifically. One would need much more data to work out what would be the limits of this kind of ideology in terms of social structures which would support it. It is clear from the contents of the men's talk that how men speak about menstruation is strongly connected to surrounding sets of beliefs held in society.

CHAPTER 7

INTERPRETING ATTITUDES TOWARDS MENSTRUATION: IS REPRODUCTION CENTRAL?

"Menstruation is sometimes described as 'the weeping of a disappointed uterus'". (Sir Norman Jeffcoate, Principles of Gynaecology, 1975).

"Both menstrual segregation and male segregation practices can be interpreted as elaborate public expressions of the belief in the polluting nature of fertile women... Our theory of ritual politics argues that these practices are a response to the dilemma that a woman's fertility creates for her husband." (K.E. and J.M. Paige, The Politics of Reproductive Ritual, 1981).

"Menstruation... is the time when the healthy woman may draw upon abilities and capacities that are not related to the values of ovulation and childbearing, but that are instead related to that other side of her nature, of independence of thought and action. It is the exact counterpart, but in an opposite sense, of the ovulation. At ovulaton she wishes to receive, accept, build, if she desires a child. But from menstruation there is a different set of energies available to her of receiving, accepting, building the child which is herself." (Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove, The Wise Wound, 1978).

"It is proposed that we start by referring to the identifiable and important points in reproductive process as 'moments'... Menstruation... might be called a negative moment: it signifies its importance to reproductive process by not happening. Further it shares with many of these moments a great burden of accumulated symbolism and sheer superstition... The fact that menstruation seems to have inspired men to derogatory efforts in myth, magic and mania, despite the involuntary and wholly female nature of menstruation, is probably at least partly due to the visibility of menstruation." (Mary O'Brien, The Politics of Reproduction, 1980).

"Whether or not woman was actually the originator of taboo, the mere existence of a menstrual taboo signifies, for better or for worse, powers only half-understood; the fear of woman and the mystery of her motherhood." (Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born, 1977).

Many of the most popular modern theories about social understandings of menstruation, feminist and anti-feminist, 'scientific' and mystical, proceed from the assumption that such understandings are rooted in menstruation's place in the reproductive process. There are considerable differences among such theories, for they have different views of the significance of the whole business of conception, pregnancy and childbearing itself.

Gynaecologists like Jeffcoate tend to take the purpose of a

woman's existence to be childbearing, and calmly attribute intentions along these lines to parts of her body. Menstruation may then be treated as evidence that a particular woman is not complying with her proper function. Other theories are rather more subtle, but they too tend to read the theorest's beliefs about reproductive biology into people's behaviours without reference to any specific individuals' own accounts. Paige and Paige take menstruation to represent the fact that a woman is potentially capable of childbearing, while Shuttle and Redgrove take it as some sort of anti-reproductive statements or state. They would have it that women's entire being vacillates monthly between preoccupation with babies and preoccupation with self.

The feminists, O'Brien and Rich, agree with Paige and Paige that menstruation is understood as a sign of fertility, but argue further that men are by nature threatened by women's childbearing ability and have organised a woman-hating culture to defend their egos from this threat.

The theories draw upon a set of beliefs about how menstruation fits into the reproductive process which I should perhaps spell out at the start, for they no doubt belong to a quite specific time and place. A period is held to follow fourteen days after a woman has ovulated, if the ovum is not fertilized. The menstrual fluid is made up mainly of the endometrium, the lining which the womb has built up in preparation for a embryo to be implanted. The

whole system is hormonally controlled. Menstruation is therefore taken to be a sign of fertility but of non-pregnancy.

It is now thought, however, that menstruation fairly frequently occurs without prior ovulation. Women can also menstruate and be infertile for other reasons. Regular periods can be simulated, as with most oral contraceptives, in the absence of ovulation, by artificial stimulation with and withdrawal of progestogens. As a kind of footnote to the critique which follows, it is interesting to note how arguments which seek to establish the existence universal human social processes depend upon particular understandings of human biology and can be undermined by new scientific developments, changes in 'the biology'.

7.1 WHAT ABOUT ME?

I found reading all this theory rather an odd experience, as I continually returned to the question: what has this got to do with me? As a lesbian who has never been pregnant or intended to bear children, what do my periods mean? Are they meaningless? These are difficult questions to face, for what soon becomes clear is that I am actually excluded from womankind by all these theories. Women who do intend to bear children, or have already done so (lesbian or heterosexual), and women whose sexual practice involves some risk of pregnancy, are at least ostensibly

included. Social relations of gender are taken to be determined by reactions to a specific category of women - my oppression is seen as a side-effect.

So, wanting to think about menstruation in a feminist way which could account for my own experience, I began to challenge the necessity of these taken-for-granted connections with reproduction. This has led me further to reconsider the place of reproduction within feminist theories of women's oppression generally.

These issues are difficult to see clearly. It is a central feature of patriarchy that men explain and justify their power by reference to biology - patriarchal ideology revolves around representing female and male bodies as naturally expressing their different places as oppressed and oppressor. Nature is said to determine that a woman's place will be forever where men want her.

This is commonplace among feminists, but it is far less clear how we should attack it. For biology, at some level, is real. Some feminists, for example Shulamith Firestone (1971), have argued that women's oppression can only be overcome if biology itself can be changed, in this case by artificial reproduction. Others, like Adrienne Rich (1977), have accepted the common patriarchal view that women are oppressed because of their childbearing abilities, but seek to reinterpret that ability as a power rather than a weakness. The approach I have adopted is to challenge at

each level the links our commonsense thinking makes between biology and our behaviour. I would have us challenge the descriptions men give us of biology itself.

Focusing on menstruation, then, how do we approach theorising about it? To me, any social theory has to develop from and be adequate to explain how the people it concerns understand their own actions and beliefs. This is not to say that people are always fully aware of why they do or think things, but that theories should at the very least take acount of what they do think they are doing. A useful social theory, for me, is one which helps people to understand and therefore to gain power over their own lives - perhaps to change their situation. It follows that any theory which cannot be made sense of by those it is supposed to be about cannot be correct.

At the most obvious level, this means abandoning theories which offer universal cross-cultural explanations for social practices. Black feminists have pointed out many ways in which the attempt to generalise about sexual politics from specific, white, experience can lead to racist attempts to impose inappropriate theories upon Black women (Moraga and Anzaldua 1981; Combahee River Collective 1983).

From what is known about practices relating to menstruation in many cultures (which is severely limited) it is clear that these practices are very various, as are practices

relating to all bodily matters. There may also be some common practices which are widely shared. However the first task is to understand the significance of such a practice in one culture, not to produce an overarching theory based on only superficial knowledge of many cultures. I was interested, therefore, to set the 'grand' theories beside some data on how some specific white British men regard menstruation, to get some comparison of how the two fit together.

7.2 MEN'S VIEW

I had originally intended to explore directly the question of the way in which men understood the relation between menstruation and reproduction in my interviews. But I was put off this idea at an early stage by the responses I got to this kind of questioning. My first respondent was emphatically negative on this question:

> "A: Well in the sense that, in the biological sense, of going back to why we're made the way we are... yes, but um, I suppose I tend to take those sort of things, not exactly for granted, but... I don't have a sort of intellectual yearning to know about questions like that... I mean I think the social understandings of biological facts are very interesting, but I don't think I need to know why women menstruate, in a biological sense..." (A 6)

I found that this kind of question tended to make men I spoke to anxious, because they had not considered it very much and my asking made them feel that they should have done.

When I was asking general questions about menstruation, men rarely spontaneously related it to reproduction. Although these men were on the whole well-informed about the biological significance of menstruation, from school sex education lessons and so forth, this was not high in their consciousness on the subject.

When I questioned them specifically, three men spoke about having anxiously awaited a period when they feared a woman with whom they had a sexual relationship might be pregnant. Two, one of them the only homosexual in the group, also mentioned having been aware of women friends being in this situation. One man tells of a particular incident in the past:

> "M:... I don't specifically remember an occasion with my first relationship, there must have been some... fairly sure there were. With my present relationship, when we first got together, which was a very romantic period, at the time it seemed quite ordinary, looking back it was loony - we didn't really discuss the question of using any contraception, and so that went on for a while... suddenly came round and realised what was going on and so sweated ... sat and sweated for about two weeks, but fortunately... a source of

relief. Put it in those terms, yes I can remember other relatoinships, with women friends, certainly () waiting on preiods, see. What's interesting, I'm far more aware of that with women friends, than men, waiting - but on the other hand they () tend to be closer relationships, historically... (M 10)

Only one man had been aware of awaiting the time of a period hopefully, when his wife was trying to get pregnant. They had difficulty in conceiving and for a while they were extremely aware of her menstrual cycle, trying to time intercourse during her fertile phase. When I asked him whether he had been very conscious of the days she was due, he replied:

"C: I hadn't ... Yes I suppose we were... () Yes I suppose we must have been,and there would therefore be a disappointment when and if the period came, yes and it would therefore signal that. I hadn't really thought of that, but it must have had that meaning, yes. I'm more aware of the pressure on timing that awareness of the cycle produced when we were trying to work out ovulation.And it's true, obviously that a period meant lack of success that month, but I think this is more a male point of view, I was more worried about having to get the timing for having sex right in terms of ovulation. It's a real turn-off, let me tell you... no I wasn't suited to that at all, I didn't find that fun a bit." (C 5)

Again the connection is recognised once it is suggested,but it is not spontaneously seen as important.

Another type of reproductive context for menstruation is as a time in the menstrual cycle when a woman is unlikely to conceive. Two of the men I interviewed spoke about menstruation as a good time for having sex since the risk of pregnancy would be minimal. One man raised this in response to my questions about his experiences of waiting for an overdue period:

> "H: ... I don't think I've had many relationships where there's been anxiety about being overdue. Only two or three occasions I think. I certainly remember times when someone either was or had just been menstruating and me trying to persuade them, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, that we can actually have intercourse, because she's pretty safe and she saying 'well, I'd rather rather not because it's not 100% safe' and me persisting and saying 'it's pretty well 100%''. (H 8/9)

Another said:

> "I can remember vague references to the fact that it was, that there was a sense in which it was a good time to do it because you knew you were safe - I mean that was a bit of a common parlance, that I'd picked up somewhere, but it didn't really arise..." (N 3)

But awareness about fertility generally (for instance, recognition of their own ability to father children) varies enormously within my sample. Within the men's group, at one point one man is saying that he enjoys sex more during menstruation that at other times and he continues:

"- I think the extent to which that's true is partly that the fear of pregnancy is almost nil, () I think you can be much more relaxed in that sense, so that you can actually enjoy sex... that relates to contraception as well I think, specially if you're using contraception other than the Pill - you can be much more relaxed about things.

- God, I never worry about that... I never think about people getting pregnant when I'm making love. In any circumstances.

- yes, yes

- except if you're using durex... or sometimes the cap... if you're conscious of it of course you are conscious of it... and I've never been conscious of the coil, or, certainly the Pill.

- mm

- I've never been able to forget coils

- no, I haven't, did you get.. for what reason do you say that?

- just because they're so ever-present

- did they pierce you?

- oh, god, yes! ()... I didn't know what it was the first time I came across one, I nearly died."

(group 22/23)

The group discussion, when it briefly focuses upon contraception, dwells solely on the inconvenience it may impose upon men. Indeed, for at least one man, being aware of the issue of contraception is confused with whether or not he can physically detect it. On the whole, these men seem

extraordinarily unconcerned with the reproductive
of their sex lives. Evidently even by this relative
feminist group, women continue to be awarded
responsibility for fertility control.

It seems likely that such blithe indifference to
issues is a particularly modern phenomenon. Recent
have seen a tendency for men to be held less an
responsible for pregnancies they had a part in cr
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whether he saw it as similar to other blood or as something
different. In each case the man seems to draw on a
connection to childbirth to explain his feelings, though
the feelings are different in each case:

> "E:... I don't think I do tend to associate menstrual
> blood which, I would associate with an injury... I
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> "E:... I don't think I do tend to associate menstrual blood which, I would associate with an injury... I sort of see it as a non-violent association. And

having seen natural childbirth take place, and things. .. yeah, it's quite sacred for me, and the sort of, the smells, and the character of the actual blood is much less violent much more primal...

Perhaps primal is the wrong word?

A sort of age old feeling, a sort of respect for one's body, or for another person's body, and what comes out of it. And what goes in. Yeah I suppose that's it... just sort of unifying bodymind, getting an impression of people's bodies and minds together in a relationship... The way women change when they have their periods, and the way their bodies change, the way their needs and tensions change. Sounds quite theoretical, and sometimes I find myself being, not taking enough into account about people's cycles, and like they say about the trauma of childbirth and pregnancy and things, I find that I still have to sort of battle quite a lot to even just sort of feel easy with the ideas and information that I'm getting about things like that. I think initially I was quite sort of tokenistic, saying ah, I'm very much into the women's movement, I'm interested in women, and feeling totally committed personally, but in reality I was just sort of being quite dogmatic and quite condescending." (E 7/8)

"J: Well in a sense I feel the same about it. In another sense, when a woman I know is menstruating I feel quite protective towards her... I've thought

about this is a lot and I've tried to work out why... it's not just because of any pain she might be in, there is also another element, I'm not sure why, I just feel very protective.

SL: That she's vulnerable somehow?

J: Yeah I mean, the girl I'm having a relationship with at the moment, her periods aren't that much of a problem to her, she isn't particularly vulnerable, so it's not... I don't know what it is. It's got something to do... I've got some feelings about birth or something, I'm not really sure exactly why I feel it. But I just get to feel very soft, protective...

SL: as if... that it makes you think of her as a person who could give birth?... or?

J: yes. Partly that it makes me think of her as someone who could give birth. Partly because I feel it's almost as if it is a small birth." (J 5)

This last man has a woman friend who refers to her periods as "giving birth".

These speeches in themselves do support the idea that some men at least relate to menstruation as a reproductive event, or as somehow representing childbearing. However these men are a minority of the sample - others made quite different responses to my question. A few said that they did see menstrual blood as just like other blood. Others saw it as impure in some way, and others still saw it more as a "sexual secretion" than as blood. I can see no basis for thinkig that the men quoted above are expressing 'the

male perspective' more truly than the others in the group, nor for seeing these statements as in any way explanatory of other attitudes towards menstruation.

I only managed to interview one man with grownup daughters. I was particularly interested in whether or not he saw his daughters' menstruation as signifying their fertility. His response to my questioning about his thoughts about his daughters' menarches was most definite:

> "N: No I didn't relate the two - yeah, I didn't relate the two events at all, in that sense, and still don't really. I don't think to look for telltale signs that they're not having them to find out whether they're pregnant () I do see the two issues as not being connected really." (N 7)

My final piece of evidence is an interesting example of how theories feed back to the people they concern. In the men's group, following from a discussion about whether menstruation is painful for women because it is devalued or whether it is naturally problematic one man asks:

> "- Do men feel an envy, an envy? I don't mean of the pain particularly, but of women having that as being in some way symbolic of being able to have children... is there something that says that's an important thing that we haven't got? that they have? no?
> (gap)
> - no conscious of it
> (indistinct) are you?

- I don't know, when people were talking about it as something which happens every month, and that it represents something,... a mysterious thing to which I can have no access, which is debarred for me, forever, because of my biological nature, then yes I suppose I might be a bit. It's not a desire to have those experiences particularly, but it seems very other than. Seems very different, something that's very inaccessible. I take it? this is just me?

- (sigh) (group 15)

As the man says, resenting the idea that something a woman experiences is inaccessible to oneself and envying it are two entirely different things.

Individual men, then, do not seem to readily make the link between menstruation and the reproductive process. But there are within our culture discourses which do make this link more emphatically - one important discourse of this kind is the medical one.

7.2.1 The Medical Approach

Medical views of menstruation are complex, and will be discussed much more fully in Chapters 9 to 11. However, we should note here that in contrast to the view of the laymen in my interview sample, it is true that among medical men their understanding of the reproductive process does form an important interpretive framework for menstruation.

Gynaecologists would be expected to be especially focused

upon the reproductive system, since this is the object of their work. The ideology they promote is one which defines woman primarily as a childbearing creature. One of the ways in which they interpret menstruation seems to be as a sign that the woman is not as she should be: pregnant or lactating. Menstruation is not felt to be entirely a natural event, and they are uninterested to the point of hostility in menstrual problems. One essay on the "Control of Menstruation", published in 1977, sets out an alarmingly common line of thinking on menstruation:

> "We have become conditioned to regard the menstrual cycle as the norm and pregnancy as an unnatural event. Contraceptive medication is designed to mimic this 'normal' cycle and menstruation is encouraged to occur once a month. But we tend to forget that in free-living communities of wild primates, menstruation is the exception rather than the rule. To undergo a repeated succession of sterile cycles is abnormal, and pathological changes may ensue. Is it not time that we re-examined our approach to contraception, to see whether this monthly turmoil would not be better abolished rather than encouraged?" (Short 1977)

As has frequently been pointed out, this sort of reasoning from other species to establish the 'natural' state of human beings is always highly selective of the features it seeks to encourage. (cf Hubbard et al 1979; Brighton Women and Science Group 1980).

But the medical view incorporates a number of aspects of

the male perspective on menstruation, and contains its own contradictions - it cannot be summed up simply as seeing it in reproductive terms. Menstruation itself and especially menstrual problems are also seen as evidence of women's physical inferiority, and as signs of a refusal of the female role. Women, accused of inventing menstrual pain, are suspected of trying to avoid housework or "their responsibilities" as much as of refusing childbearing, though childbirth is often believed to be a solution. Medical men also share with other men the idea that menstruation is importantly a sexual event, signifying something about the woman's sexuality.

There are, then, different accounts of menstruation among men in this culture. I have only begun to unravel the connections and contradictions between these different kinds of discourse. I think that my data shows that it is at least possible for men not to understand menstruation as necessarily or crucially related to reproduction.

7.3 IS OUR CULTURE UNIQUE?

But is this tendency for modern men not to see menstruation as centrally a reproductive matter specific to our alienated culture? Might it not be a product of increased control over fertility, the drop in the birth rate? I think there is reason to believe that a strong consciousness of menstruation's role in reproduction could

could be the exception rather than the rule.

Clearly menstruation is something which happens to women and not to men - so is childbearing. Evidently it relates to the same areas of the body as does reproduction - but then this area could be seen as primarily a 'sexual' area rather than a 'reproductive' one. It is also observable that menstruation stops when a woman is pregnant. But the significance of all these facts is far from obvious. What kind of picture of female reproductive anatomy different cultures have developed is a question we cannot answer for lack of information.

Western medicine did not come up with an accurate account of ovulation and its relation to menstruation until this century. The ovum was only discovered in 1827. Seventeenth century medicine operated with complex theories of the economy of the blood within the body and saw menstruation as the way in which women disposed of excess, potentially toxic, blood. Most diseases affecting women were thought to result from too much or too little menstrual flow (Hilda Smith 1976). Here is one explanation given for menstruation:

> "Women were made to stay at home and to looke after the Household employments, and because such business is accomplished with much ease, without any vehement stirrings of the body, therefore hath provident Nature assigned to them their monthly courses, that by the benefit of those evacuations, the feculent and corrupt

> bloud, might be purified, which otherwise, as being the purst part of the bloud, would turne to ranke poyson; like the seed ejaculated out of its proper vessells." (Fontanus, 1652: quoted in Smith, 1976).

Numerous different accounts have been produced throughout history and across different cultures of menstruation's physiological meaning, fitting it in with the culture's general beliefs about the body. Many lay people today do not understand, or perhaps do not accept, the modern medical account of the biology of reproduction. It seems likely that menstruation will always be seen as having some connection with the way in which the sex difference is understood - but this need not hinge upon reproduction.

One writer who has looked seriously at similar problems of interpretation is Gilbert Lewis (1980). He studied the Gnau, whose men practice various rites involving making the penis bleed, rites of a kind which are quite common in various forms throughout New Guinea. Ethnographers of other tribes have interpreted these rites as being evidence that the men envy and seek to emulate women's menstruation and hence their reproductive abilities. Bettelheim (1968), who extended this case to make a general argument about human nature, is the most commonly cited exponent of this line of thinking.

Lewis found that the Gnau do not say that this kind of

bleeding has anything to do with menstruation, and did not take up the parallel when he suggested it to them. He asks:

> "Might not the anthropologist be revealing himself and his preoccupations rather than the Gnau's when he tells us that the Gnau penis-bleeding is a kind of male menstruation when the Gnau do not see it so?"

He reports further that the Gnau are "undecided and uncertain" when asked about the physical function of menstruation, though they regard it as very dangerous to adult men. Their version of its place in the reproductive process is that if a woman stops menstruating, she may then become pregnant (p.129).

I cannot do justice to Lewis' very interesting work here. I mention it as a case where a careful ethnographer has compared a people's own account of their practices to an outsider's theoretical explanation and has found the theory unconvincing.

It is a distinctly deterministic viewpoint which reads biological explanations into the practices of cultures which do not share with us even the same understanding of biology. Why should this view be so widespread?

7.4 COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

What I have found in interviewing men about menstruation

along with a relative absence of consideration of its place in reproduction, has been a preoccupation with sexuality far beyond what I would have expected. Menstruation and even menstrual pain were seen as important and relevant most frequently in relation to how they affected men's sexual access to women. The jokes and the talk which go on in men-only groups, when they mention menstruation, focus on what men see as the sexual significance of periods, never on its reproductive meaning. It seems to me that menstruation is understood by men in the context of the enforcement of heterosexuality upon women, and that this meaning is in fact prior to any reproductive meaning.

Aspects of relations between the sexes, of the oppression of women, are very frequently explained by reference to some aspect of the process of reproduction. This presents women's situation as 'necessarily so' or even natural, for it places the cause of it in a process which is generally understood to be universal and necessary. It avoids consideration of sexuality (except as an assumed part of reproduction) and of men's general activity and motivation in relation to women.

Mary O'Brien has written a highly developed version of this account of women's oppression - <u>The Politics of Reproduction</u> (1980). She sees reproduction as a process in which the consciousnesses of all human beings are involved. However because the "means of reproduction" are located within women's bodies, men and women have radically different

reproductive consciousnesses. The labour of childbirth enables women to mediate their alienation from their seed, but for men there is no such process - they are in practice excluded from the work of reproduction. O'Brien sees men's appropriation of women and children as their attempts to deal with this alienation.

But she does see some hope for the future, for she regards contraception as having entirely changed the relations of reproduction. She believes that it will allow reproduction to be brought for the first time under "rational control".

What does it mean, though, to say that reproduction has not been under rational control all along, since people understood that coitus could cause conception? Surely it is simple enough, rationally, not to engage in heterosexual intercourse with penetration by the penis if one wished to avoid pregnancy. The point is, of course, that in practice women have not been free to make this choice, for women have not been allowed control over their own bodies. Men have demanded sexual access to women without regard to the consequences, and have had sufficient social power over women to have on the whole succeeded.

As Adrienne Rich argues in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), where she develops her analysis beyond her earlier work, if heterosexuality were innate, why is it so easy to identify numerous ways in which women are coerced into it? The sexual division of

labour in most societies makes living outside a marriage extremely difficult. Unmarried women are subjected to attacks which have ranged "from aspersion and mockery to deliverate gynocide, including the burning and torturing of millions of widows and spinsters during the witch persecutions of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, and the practice of suttee on widows in India". Rich continues that:

> "Some of the forms by which male power manifests itself are more easily recognisable as enforcing heterosexuality on women than others. Yet each one I have listed adds to the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives. The chastity belt; child marriage; erasure of lesbian existence (except as exotic and perverse) in art, literature and film; idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage - these are some fairly obvious forms of compulsion, the first two exemplifying physical force, the second two control of consciousness." (p.71)

Rich also discusses the practices of clitoridectomy, pornography, sexual harassment at work and female sexual slavery as parts of this network of coercive forces.

Indeed it is the way in which the institution of hetero-sexuality works which makes such abuses of women as sexual harassment, rape, especially rape in marriage, and what

Kathleen Barry (1979) has called female sexual slavery, - enforced prostitution - so difficult to clearly define and to struggle against. If women are not expected to be able to chose their sexuality, how can they be said to have been forced?

The naming of the institution of compulsory heterosexuality is very important for feminism, but also for understanding many aspects of human society. It breaks one of the connections in the set of linked social processes which together assure women's subjugation and which are so much taken for granted, and makes their social construction apparent.

None of this analysis denies the fact that women may desire heterosexual sex: this is irrelevant to the social institution of heterosexuality. The point is that though women may indeed choose heterosexuality, they cannot be said to have made a free choice, when the alternatives bring with them such costs.

What is presented to us by patriarchal ideology as the natural state of humankind is actually the result of the enforcement of heterosexuality upon women. It is only in a society where women have no right to refuse men access to their vaginas that women cannot be said to be in rational control of their reproductive power. Analytically, then, reproduction has in fact been under rational control for everyone who understood the basics of biology.

The idea that everyone is naturally heterosexual has behind it, justifying and maintaining it, the idea that this is necessary for the survival of the species, therefore it must be so. But is it? Actually, only one act of heterosexual intercourse, or one injection of sperm into the vagina, is necessary to produce a pregnancy. Women are not in fact fertile throughout the menstrual cycle. Only sexual intercourse which takes place during the few days when a woman ovulates can lead to pregnancy. When a couple are given advice as to maximising their chances of conceiving they are advised to have sex strictly to the calendar. It is believed that less frequent ejaculation increases the fertility of the man's semen. As we have seen, men do not tend to enjoy this regime - they prefer to choose when they have sex. What is clear is that constant sexual access for men to women is in no way necessary to ensure that women can get pregnant when they want to.

The development of efficient artificial contraception has made it possible for men to continue to be allowed to expect constant sexual access to women, without the inconvenience of this producing unwanted pregnancies. The conditions of compulsory heterosexuality severely limit the extent to which women can use contraception for their own purposes. This has led to the defence of potentially dangerous injectible contraceptives on the basis that they are the only kind that women can in practice use in defiance of their husbands' wishes (cf John and Hadley 1984). Is this what "rational control" means?

Some women have recently been using their knowledge of their cycles to control their fertility without any artificial means of contraception - they merely abstain from sex involving penetration of the vagina by the penis during the fertile period. The primary requirement of this method is that the women must be able to control when such intercourse will take place.

My point is that women's fertility continues to <u>seem</u> outside of their conscious control only so long as one refuses to critically examine the forms of sexuality men have established as the only 'real sex', and the assumption that we are all driven naturally towards such sexual practice.

Once the compulsory nature of heterosexuality in patriarchy is made clear, one cannot continue to see reproduction as something which happens somehow by itself. It becomes necessary to examine in every society what actually motivates people, men and woman perhaps differently, to want children at all, as well as why people want the number and kind of children they want and why they raise them in the ways they do.

In relation to how attitudes towards menstruation are explained, we can see that explanations which rest upon notions about the reproductive process tend to take 'natural' heterosexuality for granted. Their image of 'woman' is a narrow one: she is certainly involved in

heterosexuality and in reproduction, indeed she is probably a wife and mother. Men's reactions to this 'woman' are then understood as following from this reproductive role.

I have already presented data which shows that the men I interviewed were in fact preoccupied with a number of aspects of menstruation, but particularly with the way in which it affects their sexual access to women. The data in this chapter, those moments where some of the men did discuss the reproductive aspects of menstruation, do not appear to be of overwhelming importance.

Menstruation is understood by men within the context of the enforcement of heterosexuality upon women - their joking is crucially concerned with this. It is striking that so many explanations for the social marking of menstruation <u>also</u> take compulsory heterosexuality as given and prefer to focus attention upon unspecified social process determined by dis-embodied reproductive necessities, than to attend to what men say they are concerned about.

It should only be necessary to look for invisible, or unconscious, causes of people's behaviour if such behaviour made no sense in other terms. This does not seem to be the case here, when men so clearly benefit from the ideology around and the etiquette of menstruation.

7.5 THE WOMAN'S POINT OF VIEW

Let us look briefly at women's consciousness about menstruation, for I believe it to be quite different from men's.

Women in our culture are, I believe, well aware of menstruation's relationship to childbearing. Women know that a missed period is a sign of pregnancy, and at a very practical level this is important information. This practical knowledge does not, however, necessarily dominate women's consciousness about it. When a woman is in certain specific situations - engaging in heterosexual intercourse and either fearing or hoping to become pregnant - this significance of her periods will indeed probably be at the top of her mind.

But how many women spend how much of their lives in this situation? Some women are celibate or lesbian, so that their usual sexual practice produces no anxiety about pregnancy - it would only be if, for instance, a lesbian was hoping to become pregnant by artificial insemination that she would see her periods as reproductive events. And among heterosexually active women, many women avoid the risk of pregnancy by using contraceptives or avoiding intercourse at certain times. Some women know themselves to be infertile and others have been sterilized. For all these women the knowledge of menstruation's connection to childbearing remains latent. A woman's thinking about

menstruation could be dominated more by any or all of a variety of other aspects - the pain which may accompany it; menstruation as sign of health; as a stigmatised state; a sign of her womanhood; or her adulthood; or indeed as a sexual issue. These suggestions are drawn from Esther Merves' American study (1983). What her work most clearly indicates is that women's experience of menstruation is made up of a number of components, and that different women emphasise different aspects of it.

I would argue, then, that interpretations of social meanings of menstruation must be based in what people in society say and do, not in theoretical arguments drawn from reproductive biology. Reference to reproduction should not be used to describe or explain social relationships which those involved do not understand as primarily relating to reproduction. If we abandon the idea that social practices regarding menstruation can be explained away as part of the natural process of reproduction, it becomes necessary to find other explanations.

My view is that menstruation is used in our culture as the basis, the excuse, for a flexible and changing set of ideas and practices which reinforce men's power over women. Any theory which encourages us to see menstruation only in a reproductive context blinds us to most aspects of how menstruation is treated in our own culture, and possibly in most other cultures. One instance of this is discussed in the next chapter: the way in which menstruation is understood to be linked to sexuality.

CHAPTER 8

MENSTRUATION AND SEXUALITY: NEW IDEOLOGIES FOR OLD

In this chapter I will present and discuss the data I have gathered on the question of beliefs about sexuality and menstruation. Sexuality here refers to heterosexual sexual practice, and to male beliefs about female sexuality. From my own perspective, I would have preferred that this should not be seen as a separate issue from the way in which relations between the sexes generally are ordered in relation to the menstrual cycle: the reasons why I have found myself obliged to address it separately will become clear from what follows.

My data on this question demonstrates, above all, the extreme messiness of the social world. Each individual man I interviewed had had different experiences, and each had interpreted them in his own way. However it is clear that individuals in this society are in no way simply 'free to choose' their sexual behaviour in relation to menstruation - each person must contend with a bewildering range of rules and ideas. That social rules about something are inconsistent and flexible does not mean that they have no impact.

My interest in how sexuality is related to menstruation within our society is focused upon the issue of how this

affects and is affected by women's oppression. For these purposes, what beliefs people hold about sexuality and menstruation is just as important as, if not more important than, what they actually do. The two things are not really separable, of course; what I would stress is that it is important not to make assumptions about what certain actions mean. When giving talks about menstruation I have often been told either that hardly anyone now avoids sex during periods, or that many people "still" do, as if this automatically told us something about our society's attitudes. But people may individually 'break' or comply with a social rule without this necessarily meaning that they reject or accept the basis upon which that rule rests.

The theoretical problem I will be looking at here is that my data does not, on the whole, fit with the most usual view of menstruation and sexuality. Not having heterosexual sexual intercourse during periods is often viewed as a crucial part of the playing out of women's oppression. Many theories of the origin of menstrual 'taboos' imply that all men are deeply repelled by the idea of sex with a menstruating women. Men in 'primitive societies', purportedly closer to nature, are believed to be acting out what all men really feel if they avoid intercourse at this time.

How then are we to understand my finding that some men say they like sex during periods? How are we to see the jokes, which form part of male culture on the subject, which dwell

upon the idea of sex with menstruating women? It is possible, within the framework of traditional ideas about male sexuality, to see this phenomenon as being the result of men's uncontrollable sex drive momentarily overcoming their underlying disgust at women's bodies. But this is not a very satisfactory explanation. Should we then see these men as not sexist, as having transcended their 'conditioning' in some way?

I will suggest that what we are seeing is the development of a new ideology of sexuality and menstruation - one which expresses somewhat different, but equally oppressive, ideas about women. I will expand upon this idea after I present some of the data from my interviews with men and from the men's group.

8.1 WHAT MEN SAID ABOUT SEX

We have already seen something of how male culture deals with these issues. But men also talked a good deal at a more personal level about sex and periods, and it is some of this material that I will present here. This falls into several categories: some told me about their present practice, or their present feelings about it, others told me about how they had dealt with it in the past, and others still reported on ideas they had heard expressed by other people. Not all told me about each of these, and I did not press them where they volunteered nothing. For this reason

I do not give any numerical summaries of their attitudes on these issues.

In any case it would make little sense to summarise what the men told me in terms of such and such a percentage do have sex during menstruation, and such and such do not. Of those in heterosexual relationships, some do now and some do not. Some never had done, some had never not done so. What each of these things meant to them is equally various.

Many of the statements they made reflected changes in their consciousnesses about it: often the account is about how they learnt the rules and then how they learnt that they did not have to obey them:

> "G:... when I was about 15, 16, 17... I was going out with this girl... she'd only mention it if we couldn't have sex, she'd say, oh no I'm having my period, so I thought 'oh, you can't have sex when you have a period'.
>
> SL: So she taught you that, really?
>
> G: Yeah I didn't really question why, I didn't say 'was it because she'd feel bad? ... I suppose I just associated it with the fact that... you just couldn't, because it was dirty, I think, the idea of blood and sex and all...
>
> SL: Did you go on feeling that?
>
> G: No I don't feel like that any more. I live with two women in this house, and they're quite open about it, and they want us to know about it because they

think it's important for men to know about women's bodies." (G 3)

"SL: and with her, was it that she wanted to talk about it?

I: Yes, because, as you say, I wouldn't want to have sex, not her actually, I definitely wouldn't want to have sex anywhere near the period, or before, when she knew that her period was about to start... I just thought it was better not to.

SL: So did she mind that?

I: Well sometimes it would be (an issue), and, er, oh yeah,... she used to feel it was not to be discussed in any way.. Because I suppose I was the controlling element in the relationship as well...

SL: Do you still feel the same about that?

I: No, not at all,it doesn't bother me now. My current girlfriend, you know, will have sex during a period as well... we don't, I mean, we don't have penetrative sex anyway, we gave that up years ago (laughs) so that makes a difference I suppose to what I felt about it being unclean and a bit, um, dirty." (I 4)

"D:... It was a problem for me at first... I wasn't desperately keen on the idea... while X was having periods, um, but she talked me into it, not talked me into it but just kind of actually got me to realise that it wasn't any different. Although the actual idea, at first, wasn't very attractive...

SL: You'd always just assumed that one didn't, kind of thing?

D: Yes, that's what you're told isn't it? I mean the sort of thing you are told. I mean, yeah, looking back at school, that's the kind of jokes you would make, if you ever sort of managed to get off with some girl it would be just your luck if she's be having her period, or whatever. So yeah, I mean, that idea was definitely there, not that it was physically impossible, but just, like, you know, just that it was kind of,... almost a bit freaky, I suppose.

SL: would it be dirty?

D: mm, well that's how I pictured it, but in fact... you know, I got over that problem, and began to realise that actually it wasn't any different."

(D 3/4)

"D:.. I suppose if I'm honest I'm still not terribly keen on it.

SL: So was it really because the woman you were involved with wanted it to be all right...?

D: Well I don't know if it's commonplace, but she kind of, when she was having her period, used to feel, quite randy, whatever the expression,... so,... I don't know if that's common?" (D 6)

"K: Well when I was younger and they said that there was a lining on the womb, and that all this lining and a lot of blood came out as well, and I used to have, imagine all sorts of horrible things coming out...

Nothing specific, but something... when they said the lining of the womb, came out, I thought, euch. Yeah, massees of blood, and they said there was a lot of blood as well, as I say, I used to be amazed that they would bleed that much and it not hurt them, not make them ill.

But now, because the present girlfriend, that I'm with now... until I was going out with this present girlfriend I still imagined what I'd thought when I had the Biology lessons, but since I've been going out with my present girlfriend, I've just thought of it as just blood, just the same, because we've had sex when she's been on a period, and there has been, you know, some blood... and it's just the same, it's not different, so now, it doesn't bother me at all. I must admit at first I was a bit worried, in case there was ... god knows what coming out.

But I'll tell you what changed my mind I think, was, I remember, back to the women's magazines, a woman writing in saying her husband wouldn't make love to her while she was on her period, because he said it was disgusting, and horrible. Now I was never quite sure what was there, with the period, but I always thought, because this woman sounded so upset and distraught, that I'd always try and make an effort, no matter what was happening, to be just the same, and pretend it wasn't happening, and perhaps get over

things. So that changed my attitude a bit... and then when it actually happened, it's no different, just the same.

I couldn't imagine someone that supposedly loved her, telling her that it was, basically that she was disgusting, during that time of the month." (K 5)

"SL: When you first started having sexual relationships with women, did you just accept that there was a rule that you didn't do it during their periods...()?

H: I think to start with, yeah, and then I discovered that you could actually do it. It depended on the woman as to whether she could accept it psychologically and also whether she could accept it physically and also that lovemaking doesn't necessarily have to include sexual intercourse so that you could have lovemaking while they were menstruating without having intercourse without causing pain or having to get over some psychological hangup about it.

SL: Yes.

H: I can't remember how I found out that it was possible. Whether it was something I'd heard and tried to experiment with, or whether it was some woman who maybe encouraged me despite the fact that she was menstruating... I can't remember at all. But I tend to feel that it was through talking about it, maybe in the context which we've discussed earlier (i.e. male culture, see Chapter 6) that made me realise that it

> was possible, or realise the possibilities of it. And therefore try to persuade a woman that I was with, that because she was menstruating it didn't mean we couldn't have sex, or couldn't have intercourse. I think that's how it arose. And then actually finding out, maybe both parties, I'm sure both parties, that it was actually quite pleasurable, often more pleasurable than at other times." (H 8)

Men, then, had got their ideas on this from a variety of sources - individual women, male culture, even women's magazines.

Discussions in the men's group bring out some of the issues:

> "- It's true that when we discussed this very very briefly at our Christmas party, I made the amazing interjection that I actually seemed to enjoy sex more these days when my partner was actually menstruating ... which I partly said as a provocative remark to get you thinking about the issues, but is actually, on reflection is true. I find it has an extra thrill about it, which is presumably something to do with breaking the taboo. I certainly am not worried about having my prick covered in blood, I find that um, actually rather exciting, um, and certainly I think my present partner seems to be very turned on, into sex, at the point, when she's started menstruating, and it seems to go well at that point.

- She actually feels randy at that time?

- yes

- oh...

- which is something new, and I find very exciting ...in the past year or two

- gosh

- I think the extent to which that's true is partly that the fear of pregnancy is almost nil, () I think you can be much more relaxed in that sense, so that you can actually enjoy sex... that relates to contraception as well I think, specially if you're using contraception other than the Pill - you can be much more relaxed about things." (group 22)

"Does my experience...?

- yes, it rings bells, yes...

- it does for me... but like we talked about before, for me at least is a part of it, is to do with the unacceptability of periods, right from being little... I mean there was all sorts of things. Like touching or looking at, well anybody's genitals, it wasn't on.. and that makes the idea of doing so quite interesting. And periods were really sort of beyond the pale, you know, that's almost a last barrier in not-allowed behaviour, which is now OK, and I think that adds an extra... it's a forbidden fruit thing, I think.

- I suppose that was what was obscenely attractive about that Hells Angels thing

- mm, right,

- ... that you're actually, they'd really done what was the most taboo of things, and there's perhaps unfortunately something slightly erotic about that.

- I don't think it's necessarily unfortunate... It's like a range, you know, you're brought up with the idea, well I was, that sex in itself is dirty, and that therefore in a way that's part of its attractions, left over in there, to me... it's because it's not somehow nice, and that's a thing that goes on and on. Other things that are more unacceptable to my parents (laughs), perhaps, have built-in bits of attractiveness for me. Possibly that was just the way they talked, the way they acted maybe different, but the way they spoke, and the world they presented to me was...

- On the other hand the idea of oral sex (indistinct)

- I was going to say, yes...

- something that I haven't actually got down to yet, I still have a slight anxiety about... you know

- yes, right

- well I must say, I don't know, I mean I feel in two minds about it, it would be very nice... but I haven't, I've resisted it.

- mm, mm

- I think it depends very much on people... that's the area where that whole thing that I was up to with what my parents thought of as dirt comes back, is that for some people, it's a possibility, and for some people

it isn't... I don't mean to do, but for some people it's a possibility to do it with, and for some people it just isn't... for me. Because, I don't know, for some people almost menstruation as a whole is something that's unacceptable, perhaps for some people it's OK, and once the taboo's broken it's broken in any way, but it only relates to particular people...

- I can't say I fancy the idea of the taste of blood particularly. ()

- ... you know, in fact, in oral sex, I would imagine that it's quite unlikely that you would have to taste blood.

- oh yeah

- you think?

- oh yes, I mean...

- well, taste and smell, it's bound to

- not much though

- but smell certainly

- well you can see it, so you're going to taste it, aren't you?

- but there's not much of it, at one moment

- that's what I'm saying, that at any one moment, in the area that... where you're having oral sex, that you're actually having oral sex, there's not going to be so much...

- when you make love, in that situation... well my prick's always surprisingly unbloody, I mean you don't really... it doesn't involve that much blood... which did I suppose surprise me. It reflects I suppose the

sort of ideas that I'd had before, about pints of blood...()

- A woman who had not taken on or had to rid of the basic taboo about menstruation... whether oral sex would?, with a bloke, would perhaps be the ultimate in acceptance,... I mean, that her lover would be so accepting of her as to be willing to have oral sex with her when she was menstruating

- Mm

- You know what I mean, the ultimate acceptance... of her body and her body's functions

(gap)

- that's a bit like

- but then you can

- praying to a Greek goddess (laughs)

(gap)

- anyway the thought of having sex with people who are having periods doesn't sort of turn me off or on, any more than normal (laughs)... no particular thrill, or particular rejection, to be quite honest... state my point here... quite boring really (laughter)"

(group 22-25)

8.2 BREAKING THE TABOO?

Here we have at least one man speaking with what sounds like self-satisfaction about enjoying sex during menstruation. Interestingly others in the group do not take

that pleasure at face value, but analyse it as a sense of power he gains from rebelling against the standards set by the culture he grew up in. One of my individual respondents puts it in similar terms:

> "I think that I thought that it was... no, not dirty ... I think I thought that it was exciting, you know, that we were sort of breaking some rule... (gap)... that particular rule was broken along with a whole lot of other rules at the same time... it developed in terms of what I was thinking about things in general." (A 9)

It is striking, too, that in the group discussion (the only place where this is mentioned at all) men who are calm about penetration with the penis, which they call "making love", during menstruation, express anxiety about "oral sex". They see oral sex as involving them in extreme closeness to the woman. The remark about the "Greek goddess" would imply that oral sex is seen almost as servitude - more than a mortal woman could expect of a man! Surveys such as <u>The Hite Report</u> on female sexuality (1977) find that women are more likely to find oral sex to themselves sexually satisfying than they are conventional intercourse. We may learn from this, then, that if men decide to engage in what they regard as 'real sex', the sexual practice which they tend to prefer, during menstruation, it does not follow that they are ignoring the fact that the woman is menstruating, acting as if her menstruation had no effect on their relationship - they are

merely adjusting the boundaries of what may and may not take place.

We have seen, then, that for some men in my sample, their experience of deciding to 'break the taboo' against sexual intercourse during periods is closely linked to their feelings about the culture which made such rules in the first place. So what characterizes the 'old' system they are reacting to?

In a few places in my interviews men referred to what they thought older men's practice and ideas were, but in the main they did not offer clear notions of systems of sexual relations. Unfortunately, the oldest man I interviewed was only 40. It is important, I think, not to therefore work with a stereotyped idea of what 'would have' been so in the past. Although we know that many 'traditional' social systems have supported ideologies in which menstruating women have been regarded as polluting, we should not therefore assume it is obvious what exactly that means in any given situation. Some cultures have beliefs that sexual intercourse during menstruation is dangerous to the man's health, some to his sexual energy, others that it is dangerous to the woman herself or to other people, and others still that it is sinful rather than dangerous. Each of these leads to quite different consequences.

I have found a few traces of danger beliefs about sex during menstruation in this country. Several gynaecology

texts are anxious to allay fears that sex at that time is physically harmful. I have heard one anecdote from a friend about a young working class woman who was afraid she would develop "VD" as a result of having done this. But I do not know how widespread or important this sort of belief is. None of the men I interviewed reported ever having believed it to be dangerous to themselves or to women, though some said they had assumed it to be "physically impossible" when they learnt that it was not done (see also Chapter 5.1).

More often than this I have heard the idea that "a decent man leaves his wife alone then". Behind this formulation we can clearly see a familiar set of beliefs about male sexuality as constant, energetic; female sexuality as nonexistent - sexual service as the wife's marital duty. Heather Clark (1983, unpublished) quotes in her dissertation a story her mother told her:

> "During the 1940s, in one Birkenhead shipyard, it was common practice to 'send to Coventry' any man whose wife gave birth to a baby with a 'strawberry mark', as this was believed to have resulted from intercourse during the wife's 'period'. 'You couldn't even stay away from her <u>then</u>' was apparently the derisive accusation."

A similar attitude comes through in some things men I interviewed said. In one story already quoted in Chapter 6, one man tells another about a third that "he was really a really dirty little fucker" because he had sex with his

girlfriend during her period.

So the 'respectable' attitude is reported thus:

> "... that's certainly what I would have got if I'd ever asked my father, who would I think have believed ... Sort of thinks that women are frail creatures and, you know, there are certain times when we must, you know, stand back and let them be." (C 2)

Another describes a typical conversation among young male friends:

> "... gone out with a girl, picked her up at a party or something, and they'd gone off together, and you'd ask, sort of roundabout questions, you know, what happened, and they'd say, 'oh no, it was a problem, it was time of the month, got to give her her due, you know, and you'd shrug your shoulders. And when I was younger, you know, used to say 'oh hard luck, kind of thing, (laughs) picked the wrong one', that kind of thing (laughs)." (I 5) (my emphasis)

Some feminists have suggested that the 'social rule' against sex during menstruation was originated by women. As I have explained, I do not think there is good evidence for this as an original cause - women have not had the power to enforce such a rule, and it is unclear why, if they had such power, they would choose this rule. But these notions perhaps show something of what may be the present-day origin of such an idea. If women's sexuality is essentially under male control, then at least in the 'old'

system, the demands a man might make upon a woman are limited to some extent by social rules encoding ideas of 'decency' - which is an acting-out of 'respect for women'.

8.2.1 What Men Say Women Say

But let us look further at what men said about women's part in this. These various reports of specific women's feelings about sex during periods must be seen in the context of the material in Chapter 6 about male culture, which puts forward the idea that women 'use' periods to get out of sex.

Two men I interviewed said that women they had had sexual relationships with had a greater sexual desire during their periods. In one case that was what had persuaded him to try sex at that time, which he had not previously "liked the idea of much" (D). And we have already heard this idea from the men's group.

Several men reported that women they were involved with were more worried than they were about making a mess:

> "C: She's actually more preoccupied than I am... I mean at a practical level, I think it's reasonable to stop things getting stained, I do actually, I appreciate in some ways her taking care of that, being careful in that sense, but I suspect it's also careful partly in the sense of kind of protecting herself and slightly hiding herself away. And I respect that, and I don't want to push her, in that way, so it may be

that in one sense I feel less exposed to the existence of the blood and its flow than I might be." (C 7)

" - I mean quite often, you find you've made love with someone and they start having a period (laughs) and no one's known anyway, so it leads to embarrassed faces and blood on the sheets job or something, er...

- mm

- Quite often far more embarrassment in the woman, well certainly in me, because I've sort of lost that taboo quite some time ago.

- yeah

- I think I actually, before, yes, before I started sleeping with anybody,I remember going along to some sort of Women and Anthropology classes or something, which was just discussing the menstrual taboo. Till then, it was obviously quite a big taboo, I guess..." (group 6)

"- Certainly some women that I've slept with have been totally embarrassed by having a period, and that's actually because of prior experience, and I've said, look it doesn't bother me, if it bothers you, then, fair enough...

- most people check it out, don't they?

- yes, but... quite a lot of women have actually felt incredibly rejected, not just on the sexual basis but, you know, also how dare you come into the bed sort of thing, at all... been physically not usually cuddled

or anything, actually feel incredibly worried about it, because of that sort of rejection.

- Well I think X was telling me that in a previous relationship she'd had that sort of reaction from a bloke, and he had the taboo rather than her, he didn't like it, had a hangup about it... certainly wouldn't want to make love, and that upset her quite a bit. I mean I can understand how blood might be that, might have that feeling, that taboo, obviously, from that whole thing about impurity, dirty, you know. " (group 7)

"N: ... She used to be a little concerned if I had a fair amount of blood on my penis,or something, she used to say, go and wash it, or something like that... Yes she was more squeamish about it than I was." ()

"N:... I was with the woman I'm having a relationship with at the moment, and she's having a period, or coming towards the end of it, and she was in bed, and she was looking for something. I said 'what are you looking for?' she said 'it doesn't matter'. She was looking all over the place, so I said 'sit down' (unclear) and it was a bit of a joke, um, and it happened that she was looking for a sanitary towel, and we couldn't find it... anyway I thought, I know where it's gone, it's gone between the duvet and the duvet cover, that's the only place it could be, it's nowhere else, it's clear. So anyway, there it was, and I handed it to her. But again I didn't feel any

sort of problem with that, at all, but she did.

SL: Embarrassed?

N: Well, yes, embarrassed,... shy, I suppose, which is amazing in a sense - it's obviously a block that she's got, because I mean in every other respect she is not the least bit embarrassed." (N 4)

When we analyse this series of statements using the idea of an etiquette which is quite different for women and for men, it is plain that the etiquette operates in much the same way in bed as it does elsewhere. The men I quote often use the notion of 'taboo' which implies that men and women stand in the same relationship to a general social belief. They can then interpret women's observance of menstrual etiquette as a kind of personal inadequacy, excessive conventionality, on the part of the woman.

Some men make it clear that they are aware of their own power in this situation, and use this awareness in their guesswork about what women might want: "there was, I think, there was an initial resistance from her, and I think that was probably based on feeling that I would maybe react adversely to that..." (N 3) One man even observes that women cannot be free of the fear that a man will react badly to their being menstruating, whatever the man says:

"F: yeah... yes I feel that quite a few women, if I were, if a man were to say to them that he, that they were in favour of having sex when they thought that their partner was also in favour of having sex when

they were menstruating, that the woman would feel that they were saying that in spite of their real feelings.

SL: yes I can see that.. they'd be so sure that it really was...

F: repulsive

Yes I'm sure there's one end of the spectrum of attitudes by men which that does hold true for, but I don't think it's as pervasive as a lot of women think." (F 4/5)

8.2.2 Who Decides?

The difficulties of interpretation presented by this material are well illustrated by the following sequence of questioning:

"M: On the sexual side, yes it also became apparent, I think, and that was a discussion about whether we could have a sexual relationship during the time when she was menstruating, and she had quite strong views about that, which was 'no', although she related the story of her friend who said you could do it in the bath, kind of thing (laughs). But never, never felt, she never felt at all happy, then, so that meant that for a period of the cycle there was no question of any sexual relationship.

SL: But you had thought that that would be a possibility, had you?

M: I didn't know. I mean I just accepted it. She said that wasn't a possibility, and I just accepted that was the case.

SL: Had you heard that you couldn't, do you think? When she said that, was that the first time?

M: Yes, that would be the first time I'd ever thought about it. I mean it hadn't occurred to me..." (M 4)

SL: So () in your later relationships,... there's some point where you stop not having sex during menstruation, is there?

M: Yes that's right. But in the first relationship it continued the whole way through.

SL: So for you that's always been something women have decided... or has that been negotiated?

M: yes... it's difficult, isn't it? If I can, I feel I would go for the first. I don't feel it was a subject for negotiation. I sort of felt, if that was the position, then I would accept that. In the second situation, it isn't the same sort of issue or problem - in fact... sexual interest tends to be greater during that period, anyway, so it's a different order of thing. I don't really feel conscious of having negotiated it... I felt, in my first relationship in that sense, it was far more unilateral - that was the decision. And I could take it or leave it if you see what I mean. (laughs)

SL: So you weren't feeling you were part of a general rule, but that this was <u>her</u> feeling about this... it was that she said you couldn't rather than that you just couldn't?

M: Oh, no, I think the second. I think that was true, she said we couldn't, therefore I did actually assume

> that that was the normal practice. I had no other standards on which to... I mean if... certain circumstances that subsequently became reversed, at some stage... if I was facd again with a woman who said you couldn't have sex during menstruation, I would now be in a different position, because I would now know about my own experiences that that isn't necessarily the case... so therefore it becomes a different order of thing, because then it becomes a question of (inaudible)...it sort of imposes some sort of physical problem, which is the way it was posed, the way I received it, which strengthened..." (M 5/6)

Women may, then, be active in managing the sexual situation: evidently it is common for a woman to be the one who says 'we can't, I've got my period'. But this is hardly an exercise of autonomy when many women have been taught to believe, exactly, that they 'can't', without risking various serious consequences. However men do seem to see this as the woman exercising power. It may, of course, suit a woman, for her own reasons, not to have sex at that time. This last possibility forms a major part of male discourse on the subject. I think this accusation against women, that women manipulate male ideology to gain advantage over individual men by denying them sexual access to themselves, is important in and of itself, whether or not it bears any relationship to what women actually do. The accusation in itself implies that it is illegitimate, in bad faith, for a woman to refuse sex at that time - she is held to be 'making excuses'.

I think it is clear from the data I have presented that neither of these ideological systems allows for women to have power over their own sexualities. Clearly the ideal situation for women is that each woman should herself be in a position to decide what her sexual practice will be - she should not be subject to rules which aim to control her as a member of the class 'women'. In this situation, she would decide what she preferred to do depending upon how her periods affected her and on how she felt about whatever sexual relationship she might be involved in at any given point. Obviously for this to happen the way in which heterosexual relationships generally work would have to be transformed, not just the relation to menstruation, for woman cannot be free as individuals in a relationship where the male-female sex-class relation is always present.

Although in a lesbian sexual relationship there is no pre-defined power difference between the two women so that no specific etiquette in relation to menstruation would necessarily exist, lesbian relationships cannot be seen as existing in isolation from patriarchal culture. Lesbian women have grown up and continue to live surroundd by many of the same constraints and influences as do heterosexual women and men. All women internalise some part of the male culture's opinion of women.

8.2.3 Is My Data Reliable?

Returning to men, then, we must consider the question of whether my data can be regarded as a valid indicator of

anything about this society generally. I deliberately chose to work with an untypical sample of men. It is on this subject of sexual practice and ideas about sex (if only simply in their willingness to talk to me about it) that I think my sample is probably most unlike men in general, for many of them are part of a subculture very much imbued with 'sexual liberation' ideology. However I believe this subculture is disproportionately influential on these matters, if only because of their articulacy. (1)

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(1) Data from other sources indicate that what men said to me was not wholly atypical. Shere Hite's postal survey of US men asked the question "Do you enjoy sex with a woman who is menstruating?" Of those who replied anonymously, 67% said yes, and of those who replied non-anonymously, 81% said yes. Two and three percent of the remainder said they would try it, and the rest said no (1981). Sharon Golub's study (1981) of college students drew a similar response to the question "Would you have sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman?" - 86% said yes. However rather fewer, 79%, said that they were "as attracted to and aroused by a menstruating woman". Asked about real life, 43% of the male students agreed that they did "make fewer sexual advances toward a menstruating woman". Golub does not give any further details about the "no" responses, and one wonders whether, given that her population is of 20 year old Catholic students, there may be some problem about a good proportion of them not having sex lives of any kind!

So how are we to see this phenomenon? Are men freeing themselves and us with them from old-fashioned sexist restrictions? I suggest that we must look again at both the 'old' and the 'new' sets of ideas to seek the solution to this puzzle.

The 'old' system (which I feel we know too little about) is indeed sexist - it is based upon rigid notions of women's and men's 'place'. However, the idea of 'respect' for women, even though it is a hypocritical kind of regard for one's inferiors, could suit women in certain situations. Rules do at least protect women to some degree from men making arbitrary sexual demands upon them. And, conversely, though the 'old' system serves the power of men as a group, this may be, perhaps, at some cost to the desires of individual men.

The joking recounted in Chapter 6 is very much about men negotiating the power structure of the 'old' system. Men repeatedly acknowledge that the 'old' system trained them to see women as set on trying to deny them sex. In the group discussion, one man stresses that what he saw as new about 'sixties feminism was that <u>women</u> were advocating what the male culture had wanted all along. It is clear here that he is interpreting the feminist impulse in a narrowly sexual way, as like to what men had been talking about:

> "- One thing that influenced me a lot was reading Germaine Greer, (<u>The Female Eunuch</u>. 1970) it wasn't

long after I'd had my first proper sexual relationship () She has something about how women should liberate themselves by being able to drink their menstrual blood, i.e. come to terms with the taboo, and it really...I can see that as a 'before' and 'after'... the fact that women were saying those things definitely broke the taboo for me... () If <u>women</u> could say that sort of thing... and obviously there was a lot of talk about it at the time, then it seemed to me that the taboo was a taboo worth breaking." (group 7)(2)

What is the new ideology then? Both the old and the new

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(2) I was very interested to come across the following feminist criticism of Germaine Greer's work written in 1970 by Sheila Rowbotham, when it first appeared: "There's a danger that you start to throw out alternative stereotypes of the liberated woman. These are just gags on other women. You reduce what is a unique dialogue for every woman, between her, the movement, and the world outside into simply new ways in which she ought to behave. Thus the liberated woman is ready to lick menstrual blood off his cock, she doesn't make up reading lists or sit on committees. There's a funny way in which people who are most concerned to resist all the rules individually start inventing a whole lot of new ones for other people. I mean, menstrual blood on his cock might just be a matter of taste not liberation."

ideas define menstruation largely by reference to sex with men. Put in the simplest possible terms, the new ideology makes menstruation out to be a sexual thing, where before it was seen if anything as anti-sexual, inimical to sexuality. It is part of the 'sexual liberation' ideology, which emphasises the sexual nature of women. This sexualising can be degrading in a new way - it involves seeing women more as a herd than even as a class: 'all the same in the dark'. Women are seen as driven by needs which they may not be aware of - which male researchers may be able to discover by methods which entirely bypass the consciousness of the woman. For the characteristic mode of this discourse is sex research.

8.3 SEX RESEARCHERS INTERVENE

I have been looking at the problem rather as one negotiated between men in general and individual men, but of course this is far too simple - institutions intervene. Specifically this century the development of 'sex research' - the supposedly scientific investigation of human sexual behaviour - has given rise to a new set of experts who compete with the spokesmen of moral systems such as religion for a legitimate voice in determining the sexual mores of the society. They have built up an ideology of 'natural' sexuality, by using purportedly noninvasive natural-scientific methods to observe sexual behaviour. They then declared what they saw to be eternal truths about

male and female sexuality.

This movement has been analysed by feminists as an attempt to control women's sexuality - and as a response to the beginnings of feminism (Jackson 1983; Jeffrey; 1982, 1983). It is characterised by the refusal to consider social factors as affecting sexual behaviour.

A classic example of this approach, relating to the topic we are considering, is an article by Udry and Morris in Nature (1968), entitled "Distribution of coitus in the menstrual cycle". It reports on two studies of women's reports of their sexual activities over the menstrual cycle. "Orgasm" and "coitus" are plotted against cycle-days. It is taken for granted that if any pattern can be found, there must be some sort of hormonal explanation for it. When variations in the patterns are found between two socially different groups the authors comment:

> "Variations from one sample to another suggest that the influence of cyclic female hormones on sexual behaviour is more apparent in some groups than in others."

I hope that the absurdity of this reasoning is self-evident.

The sex researchers have been very interested in the 'issue' of sex during periods, and have in general been in favour of it, as they are, also, in favour of sex of any

sort men like at any time men please. Havelock Ellis, a very influential early writer, devotes considerable space to discussion of this issue (1913). He begins his work by summarising research that had been carried out which attempted to establish 'facts' about a cyclic pattern of desire in women. Evidently for every possible theory about at what point in the menstrual cycle women most want sex, there was even then a serious article written advocating it - usually with some sort of anecdotal evidence. Similar research continues (cf Dennerstein and Burrows 1983:207). I would see this preoccupation as part of the larger enterprise of producing evidence first that 'women really want it' and secondly of identifying <u>when</u> women really want it. This enterprise in itself reduces women to thing status - it is an attempt to produce 'information' which could overrule women's dangerous tendency to make up their own minds about their sexual activities. If men could know what women wanted without asking women - if men could scientifically find this out - how useful this would be! The present-day consensus among the researchers, not surprisingly, seems to be that women really do want it when they have periods - this is 'proved' in a number of ways, not I think worth criticising here.

It is striking that the researchers, like the men I interviewed, while they are very concerned with the 'taboo' against sex during periods show no interest at all in changing the general etiquette of secrecy about menstruation. Why should they? There is nothing for men

to gain from doing so.

In Sheila Jeffreys' work on the sex researchers (1982), she focuses on their creation of frigidity as a disease of women, and Ellis' advocacy of the "erotic rights of women", as defined by himself. She sees this as a backlash against the early feminists' refusal of male-controlled sexuality. We can see here a parallel with male concern about menstruation at present. Men's concern is that women should be 'free' to have sex with them - not that women should be free at all times to determine their own behaviour.

Jeffreys points to the two causes most commonly put forward for female frigidity or 'dyspareunia': ignorance, that is, lack of sex education, and trauma from their first sexual experience. There is here a remarkable echo of present day discourse on menstruation, which is dominated by the idea that women's problems result from lack of 'information' or 'education' and/or from having gone through a trauma over their first period. In both cases, this account focuses attention upon the individual woman's mind, and away from her present day conditions, back onto past experiences. If only women would take 'the right attitude' everything would be all right!

Another aspect of the sexual liberationist message is that it emphasizes the heterosexual couple as a social unit above other units such as the family or society generally.

In relation to menstruation, when this is sexualised, it can be used to emphasize the specialness of the couple relationship. Men 'in general' are still not supposed to know if a woman is menstruating. She is required to hide it at work, in most social situations and indeed within the family, from her father, her sons, and any other male relatives. Paige and Paige cite three US studies of menarche which had found that "a father is less likely to be told of the event than siblings, female friends, and relatives" (1981:273).

However a woman's husband or sexual partner is expected to know when she is menstruating - this is part of the 'carnal knowledge' which marks off this relationship from all others. Liberal opinion in our culture seems to be rather shocked by the idea that a husband might not know of his wife's menstruation - and yet secrecy is taken for granted as part of all other female-male relationships.

Note again the distinction men made between "women in general" and "a particular woman" (group 7) - someone they might know as a person. At some level the men I interviewed seemed to see a contradiction between their idea of 'women' and the women they had sexual relationships with. This distinction would have to be present in men's minds to create the conditions for a special couple relationship to develop.

Once this knowledge is made part of the sexual relationship,

this may then have effects in itself, and the knowledge become seen as connected with sexual access. Perhaps this is some of the meaning involved in boys' teasing of girls about sanitary towels.

Mary Douglas made a similar point, relating menstrual rituals to the practice of couvade, in her article "Couvade and menstruation: the relevance of tribal studies" (1975). She suggests that particular cultural emphasis may come to be put upon female reproductive events where the heterosexual bond is relatively weak, due, perhaps, to women having some degree of independence. In this way men seek to act out their connection with a particular woman, and perhaps their claim to rights over her reproductive capacity.

Several of the men I interviewed spoke about seeing their taking an interest in menstruation as part of the process of getting more closely involved with their wives or girlfriends: "we'll understand each other better" (C 4). In the men's group they discuss their feelings about helping the women they have relationships with to deal with painful periods, by rubbing her back, or fetching a hot water bottle.

> "- Is that a form of, of self-flaggellation, you know, I mean? (laughter)
>
> - But no, in some ways,... it's a ritual, isn't it? It's a way of saying 'I want to be part of this with you'...

- a sharing" (group 21)

This material on pain will be discussed further in Chapter 10.

8.4 FEMINIST CHALLENGE RE-DIRECTED

I see this new ideology of menstruation as in part a reaction to feminism, an attempt to contain and redirect feminist energy. Women who want to refuse the old order of menstrual secrecy are offered a new system where menstruation may be openly acknowledged within a heterosexual relationship, though not elsewhere. Women wanting freedom to determine their own sexuality find their demands reinterpreted as a sexual desire for 'sex' during periods. Indeed the issue of how society stigmatises menstruating women, seen through this lens, reappears as a question of whether or not one has sex during menstruation; a challenge to the public world redefined as a private problem.

The intellectual elaboration of this position is spelt out in The Wise Wound, where menstruation is interpreted as in itself a form of sexual energy, one aspect of women's (inherently) heterosexual being. Shuttle and Redgrove write:

> "What a strange coincidence that the very same time in the cycle of the 'paramenstrual plague' - the time when intercourse is almost universally tabooed -

> should also be the time of a rise in that very inconvenient commodity, female sexuality!" (1978:86)

They represent the whole sexist etiquette of menstruation as stemming from the suppression of a specifically sexual energy - one which is dis-embodied and described as a commodity. The solution, implicit throughout the book, is more heterosexual sex during the menstrual period - this will somehow free women to express their 'true' selves. How it will inconvenience men is unclear. Again, the evidence these authors draw upon comes from mythology on the one hand and psychology and sexology, 'science', on the other: anywhere but out of the mouths of living women. Women's motives are reconstructed without reference to women themselves.

I have tried to discuss men's view of menstruation and sexuality. My difficulty is that I do not wish to engage with any of the debates which currently take place around questions like "do women <u>really</u> want sex during periods?" or "is the sex taboo good or bad for women?", but would aim to challenge all the terms of these questions. Women are not all the same. It is part of the patriarchal system of thought that we are so routinely discussed as part of a class rather than as persons. The very focus upon these questions is part of the sexualising of menstruation.

For women, menstruation is a phenomenon which is basically independent of sexuality. As we have seen, women see it in various ways: as relating to reproduction, in terms of

health, perhaps as a nuisance or a source of pain, perhaps as part of being a woman. Women menstruate and are subject to menstrual etiquette in relation to men whether or not they engage in heterosexual intercourse.

It is men who experience menstruation as a sexual matter - principally because they see women as sexual beings above all else, and also because they define anything which comes from 'there' as sexual. The new ideology enshrines this male perspective at its core, and diminishes female experience to match.

Two women have told me stories of experiences they had as young girls which I think illustrate the imposition of a sexual atmosphere about menstruation upon women. Liz Kelly (1984) describing her experiences of sexual assault/ harassment in adolescence, writes:

> "After another incident I couldn't even explain why I had arrived home from town without the new school shirt I had been sent to buy. I had in fact been followed around the shop by a man who kept touching me up. Perhaps the reason I said nothing was that at the time I had my period and his interest was touching me where my sanitary towel was. I found this embarrassing and totally confusing."

Another woman told of visiting her father (who was separated from her mother) and sitting on his sofa, not realising that her period had come. It left a bad stain,

and her father never cleaned it. She felt he left it there to humiliate her when she visited him.

Both these women felt some puzzlement over the men's behaviour, as I felt listening to the jokes men told me. They also felt a sense of menace, as I did. For when we say that men have sexualised menstruation, we must remember what sexuality means to men in this culture: that it is the key to the subordination of women. Modern culture increasingly uses explicit reference to sexuality as a way of representing the power relation between the sexes. It is through this sexual reference that the new ideology expresses the inferiority of women in relation to menstruation - the sexual reference to some extent replaces the simpler anti-sexual 'taboo'.

CHAPTER 9

GYNAECOLOGY: ONE PATRIARCHAL MODE OF KNOWLEDGE ON MENSTRUATION

As is so often remarked, menstruation is little discussed within this culture. It features in only a few contexts, a few modes of discourse: one of these is the medical. What, then, can we learn about the social construction of menstruation from gynaecology texts? Where does the medical mode of knowledge fit into the more general picture of the patriarchal construction of menstruation?

Paula Weideger writes that the gynaecologist occupies a place of "leadership as the enforcer of the menstrual taboo" (1978:144). I have already argued that this usage of 'taboo' is unhelpful - I would disagree further with the idea of doctors as leaders of opinion. My data points towards the view that gynaecologists act primarily as men, and only secondarily as doctors - their work is a form of mediation between the male culture's view of women and the problems that women present themselves with. Men's view of menstruation could not be said to be dominated or led by any single mode of discourse on the subject - certainly the medical mode does not dominate, but rather is entirely dependent upon other sets of ideas. For this reason I have presented much of the data I gathered from medical sources within my chapters on menstrual pain (10) and on mood change (11), set in the context of men's ideas on these subjects more generally.

However gynaecologists do occupy a special place within the larger struggle between women and men and this has been recognised by feminists in their critique of the male domination of the medical profession and of medical ideas about women (Frankfort 1972: Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1973; Howell 1974; Ehrenreich and English 1979; Scully 1980; Elston 1981). They are particularly involved in confrontations between female definitions and male ones, and therefore will often be led to articulate certain pieces of ideology in very expicit ways. They also have the task of distinguishing normal phenomena from abnormal (Scully and Bart 1978) - something which they find particularly problematic in relation to menstruation.

Sources

My purpose in looking at gynaecology texts was to get a picture of the 'modern' medical view of menstruation is like. I have therefore only used texts of which editions had been published in the 1970s or 1980s. I have used two methods of selection - one of which seems to me to be likely to reflect general medical opinion more reliably than the other.

The first, more reliable, method was to write to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and to ask them which texts are the most generally used and respected among gynaecologists. Their librarian replied, pointing out that reading lists used in the education of doctors vary a great deal from one institution to another, but

giving me a basic list of six books which she thought were very widely used.

This list reads as follows:

Barnes, Josephine, Lecture notes on gynaecology, 4th edn 1980, (1st edn 1966), Blackwells, Oxford.

Clayton, Sir Stanley and J.R. Newton, A Pocket Gynaecology 9th edn 1979, (1st edn 1948), Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh.

Dewhurst, Sir. C.J. (ed), Integrated Obstetrics and Gynaecology for Postgraduates, 3rd edn 1981, (1st edn 1972), Blackwells, Oxford.

Garrey, Matthew, M., A.D.T. Govan, Colin Hodge, Robin Callander, Gynaecology Illustrated, 2nd edn 1978 (1st edn 1972), Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh.

Jeffcoate, Sir Norman, Principles of gynaecology, 4th edn 1975, (1st edn 1957) Butterworths, London.

Llewellyn-Jones, Derek, Fundamentals of obstetrics and gynaecology: Vol. 2 Gynaecology, 3rd edn 1982 (1st edn 1970), Faber and Faber, London.

My other method was to look through the catalogue and the borrowers' book at the library in the Lancaster Post-graduate Medical Centre. I looked at the books in the library which seemed to be used regularly by the doctors of the district, from the evidence of their having been borrowed by two or more people in the last three months. I

will use the texts I read from this selection for supporting evidence. To find out what the indications are about how medical opinion is changing, I have looked through current medical magazines in a rather haphazard way, and will also refer to articles discovered like this.

Only Dewhurst and Jeffcoate, of the first list, were also present in the Lancaster library.

In analysing these texts, it has not been possible to make straightforward comparisons much of the time because each text organises its information differently, and because they do not, by any means, all cover the same issues. Therefore on many questions I can only give two opinions, perhaps because only two authors expressed an opinion.

Another difficulty I have had is in how to deal with the texts mentioning some theory or kind of treatment only to deny its usefulness. I came to feel that in a number of instances, the denial itself helped to perpetuate the idea it was supposed to be disposing of. I will return to this problem later. Another problem, in general, was the language of objectivity,the manner of writing by which the author avoids stating his or her own opinion. How is one to interpret a statement like "some doctors regard the menopause as an endocrine deficiency disease" (Clayton and Newton: 22), when it is followed by no clear contradiction?

The medical mode is an especially important one to bring

into question as ideology, because it is presented as objective scientific truth, attempting to make women feel that they have no basis on which to doubt its 'information'. One thing which struck me very strongly in my reading was how extremely unscientific medical discourse in fact is - only some of the texts I studied made any attempt at a scientific approach, most being more 'common-sensical' in their tone. Circularity of logic is rife, and the notion that a hypothesis might be disproved and then abandoned seems a very foreign one to most authors. Referencing to sources was extraordinarily rare in most texts.

I have already discussed the reliability of my data in Chapter 3. I would have preferred to do much more empirical work, and to have looked in greater detail at the history of these ideas. Historical work on gynaecology is at present at a very exciting stage of development (Smith 1976; Jordanova 1980; Eccles 1982; Moscucci 1982). However I think my methods are defensible as a way of producing general indications of the range of ideas which form the current orthodoxy in this field.

The image of medicine as 'science' may perhaps be a more common illusion among lay people than among doctors themselves. Medical sociology has often attempted to separate out the ideological parts of medical discourse from the 'purely' medical parts - something I found to be impossible and undesirable (cf Armstrong 1982).

Therefore I have found myself involved in thinking about the content of the treatments given as well as the rationales offered for them. This I found difficult, especially so since I am also influenced in my judgements by numerous extraneous sources of 'information'.

Margarita Kay (1981) has identified a very interesting phenomenon in her study of the beliefs of Mexican American women. She found that many of what are now seen as 'folklore' notions held by the women she studied can be traced to origins in the 'scientific/medical' beliefs of an earlier era - for example the idea that menstruation performs a cleansing function, removes excess blood from the body. This process can also be seen in the way in which venereal disease is now sometimes held to be connected to menstruation, for instance as being a consequence of intercourse during a period - something which some doctors believed in the nineteenth century (cf King 1875).

I raise this here partly to emphasise the point that medical ideas cannot be seen as a discrete category, but also to self-critically point out how rarely we can say that feminists generate totally independent ideas about women's bodies. We are very often drawing upon either old or very new medical opinions against the current orthodoxy.

9.1 ATTITUDES TO MENSTRUATION IN GENERAL

I could not find clear and consistent differences among the doctors in their attitude to menstruation - they all express ambiguity towards it. There are numerous assertions about the normality of the process, and about the need to impress this upon women. However gynaecologists are very strongly oriented towards disease and disorder, and make few statements about 'normal menstruation'. Although they stress the normality of menstruation, they do not describe it at all clearly. For this reason we must deduce what they consider to be normal from what they discuss as abnormal.

The notion of normal menstruation is, for these gynaecologists, highly problematic. There is a line of rhetoric common to several of these texts, in which the author quotes, from the Bible or some other source, some negative attitudes to menstruation. Then they say:

> "The beliefs should be resisted and corrected. The menstrual function should be explained to girls truthfully, if simply, and they should be made to realize that they are not excreting something which is noxious but rather a manifestation of womanhood".
> (Jeffcoate:88)
>
> "Menstruation itself is surrounded by a veil of myth and nonsense... These pejorative adjectives stress the abnormality of menstruation, but are happily being replaced by a realisaton that menstruation is a normal

function, not a manifestation of uncleanliness". (Llewellyn-Jones:72)

At the same time the language of their descriptions of its physiology is peculiar. Jeffcoate mentions in passing that "menstruation is sometimes described as 'the weeping of a disappointed uterus'" (p.77). In three texts, McClure Brown, Llewellyn-Jones and Dewhurst, the process of the shedding of the endometrium (the lining of the womb) is described as necrosis, i.e. death, of cells. I had accepted this as technical language for a specific process, but was struck by the fact that Josephine Barnes gives a very full account of this process without using this term at all.

Several of the texts give some kind of general assessment of the significance of menstruation for women, in different contexts. Writing on dysfunctional uterine bleeding, Garrey states that "since menstruation is central to women's existence, any departure from the normal is likely to produce some psychological disturbance (and vice versa)" (p.86). Discussing the treatment of amenorrhoea, Dewhurst writes that the majority of women can be induced to accept their condition if they can be persuaded that lack of bleeding in itself is harmless, but that "For some women, amenorrhoea appears to present a threat to their body image, menstrual bleeding being a visible red badge of femininity" (p.70). He suggests that these women may "cheaply and conveniently" be put on the Pill.

Llewellyn-Jones writes about hysterectomy, that "The uterus, and menstruation, is to many women the core of their femininity, and the loss of the uterus has a considerable emotional response in susceptible women, particulary as it can no longer be the focus for the conversion symptoms." (p.81)

The technique of reinforcing an idea by denying it seems to me to be operating in the tendency of gynaecologists to refer in passing to ideas about hysteria. Three of my texts do this, for example, under 'dysfunctional uterine bleeding':

> "The Greeks believed that a woman's emotions were controlled by the womb - hysteros in Greek - and that a disturbance of the womb led to an hysterical state. The opposite is more nearly true, and emotions acting through the hypothalamus affect menstrual function considerably" (Llewellyn-Jones:75)

The idea that women are dominated by their wombs has a very long history (Bart and Scully 1979). Hilda Smith (1976) describes the seventeenth century medical view of women:

> "as beings whose health was determined, basically, by the fact that they were female. To be a woman meant that one was subject to fevers and ill vapors arising from a malfunctioning menstrual cycle, to hysteria resulting from a diseased womb, and to general bad health developing from a life of ease". (p.97)

The most general diseases of women were held to "proceed

from the retention, or stoppage of their courses, as the most universall, and most usual caurse". (Fontanus 1652) Modern gynaecologists do not seem free from this thinking in their more rhetorical moods.

There is a double bind here - the womb can be seen as important to all women, when it is seen as influencing their minds in an uncontrolled way; or it can be seen as only important to neurotic women, when their concern with it disrupts medical treatment in some way. Are all menstruating women seen as neurotic? This is unclear. However this ambiguity is very important since these attitudes have a real influence on decisions about hysterectomy and on the treatment of post-hysterectomy patients.

The value of the womb to women is seen in almost mystical terms: it symbolizes 'femininity', not the most exact of terms. Garrey's idea that it is "central to women's existence" is particularly chilling. Somehow one feels it to be unlikely that a doctor would write, like this, that the penis is central to men's existence. Men's sexual parts are not discussed in the same way - and when the context of this statement is the knowledge that this 'central' organ is frequently removed by medical men, such a remark about men could not have equivalent impact.

What is entirely absent is any recognition that menstruation may act as a practical indicator to women of

health and of non-pregnancy, clear findings of surveys like those of Merves (1983) and of Snowden and Christian (1983).

Another interesting index of the doctors' attitudes towards menstruation can be found in their comments on sexual intercourse during menstruation. Two doctors comment on this. Llewellyn-Jones writes:

> "Coitus during menstruation may be unaesthetic, but it is not medically dangerous, and patients who seek advice can be reassured that there is no medical reason to avoid coitus at this time." (p.72)

And Jeffcoate has a good deal to say:

> "Although most married couples are so fastidious that they naturally shun coitus during menstruation, its practice at such time is probably more frequent than is generally realised. Medical arguments against coitus during menstruation are that sexual excitement may cause uterine congestion and increase the menstrual flow, that the more vascular and friable vaginal walls may be injured, and that the associated orgasm may encourage retrograde menstruation and the development of endometriosis"...

But these are "theoretical" considerations, he says, and in the "healthy couple" there is no reason why not:

> "The only real objection is the obvious aesthetic one, and even this can be overcome if the woman first douches the vagina and then temporarily contains the uterine discharge by inserting a Dutch Cap." (p.88)

I should perhaps explain that Jeffcoate is alone in

worrying about retrograde menstruation, his idea being that in some circumstances menstrual blood may flow the wrong way, and that this could be the cause of various problems.

These references to aesthetics rather than to any danger support my view of the sexual etiquette of the present day, that the mild sense that menstrual blood is dirty leaves men reasonably free to determine their own sexual practice, while women in general are still viewed as producing unpleasant substances. Jeffcoate's recitation of medical arguments about the possible dangers of sex at this time contains some menace, and certain definite echoes of older danger beliefs can be heard. However his actual instructions for cleansing to avoid any contact between penis and menstrual blood are rather in contradiction with these threats. All that activity could surely only affect "friable" vaginal walls more, and if blood might flow backwards, surely douching would be one of the more likely ways of encouraging it to do so? His concern is clearly for the man rather than for the woman.

Normal Menstrual Cycles?

One of the issues, for the gynaecologist, is to determine the normal limits of menstruation. However the figures given vary considerably:

Normal limits for cycle length:

Barnes	21-35 days
Clayton and Newton	25-32 days
Garrey et al	21-30 days
Jeffcoate	28 days
Llewellyn-Jones	24-34 days

Number of days of flow:

Barnes	2-7
Clayton and Newton	5
Garrey et al	3-9
Jeffcoate	4
Llewellyn-Jones	1-8

In among this muddle we get statements like this:

> "The normal menstrual cycle lasts 28 days, including 5 days of bleeding... No woman is absolutely regular, and cycles of 25 to 32 days may be accepted as normal." (Clayton and Newton:15)

Only Barnes produces such a liberal statement as this: "The menstrual cycle itself also varies in different women, each having her own normal pattern" (p.36) and even she does not resist the temptation to spell out normal limits. One wonders what is to be done about women whose cycles do not fall into these narrow patterns?

And how are we to deal with the flow, each month? All these authors recommend either towels or tampons. (These books were published before the naming of the toxic shock syndrome associated with tampons and it is not mentioned.)

But there are hazards, it seems. Tampons may be left inside, "even by intelligent women" (Llewellyn-Jones:72), and Jeffcoate suggests that "In young girls they may arouse unfavourable reactions such as a morbid interest in the genital organs, masturbation and revulsion." They are however, "harmless in the normal woman" (p.88)

And how are we to think of the end of the reproductive period? Can women pass through this in good health?

> "Emotional instability, depression, fatigue, loss of libido are often met with and psychotic traits and personality disturbances tend to be aggravated." (Garrey:64)

Jeffcoate suggests that "In well adjusted women" the psychological changes of the menopause amount to "no more than a period of slight emotional instability", but that a woman's reaction will depend upon "whether she is childless and grandchildless or surrounded by a happy family" (Jeffcoate:90) Apparently there can be no such things as a happy childless woman, or as an unhappy family.

As usual, Jeffcoate regards a woman's social situation as the cause of her problems. This sort of attitude towards menopausal women has been much criticised by feminists (Reitz 1979; Weideger 1978; Seaman and Seaman 1977).

The practice of offering an idea of the proper length for menstrual cycles, and for the bleeding itself,appears to be part of the attempt to gain control of the process through

understanding. The variations in their estimates only shows up how absurd this project is - but the only alternative is to acknowledge that a woman must learn what is normal for her through experience, a recognition which undermines the doctors' claims to authority. There is an element of self-fulfilling prophesy, when medical men are giving out oral contraceptives which tidily produce 28 day cycles, so that a population survey carried out now would have a very strong tendency towards 28 days cycles!

9.2 PROBLEMS OF COMMUNICATING WITH WOMEN

It seems to me to be crucial to see the doctors' descriptive and prescriptive statements in the context of an understanding of the process of a gynaecological consultation. What can be said, and what can be heard, are to a large extent determined by the context of any given piece of communication. So next I will look at what these particular doctors advise their readers (other doctors) to do, for it seems to me that it reveals a consciousness of struggle with their patients which is not so apparent in other parts of the text.

Doctors express great frustration with women's ways of describing their menstrual experiences. Each doctor in each book patiently explains that the cycle must be counted from the first day of one period to the first day of the next. We can deduce that women tend to count bleeding days

and non-bleeding days, and that the translation is beyond the patience of busy doctors. One text, Garrey et al, suggests that by-passing speaking with the woman at all is a good plan, since she is unlikely to know what has already been done to her:

> "Previous gynaecological history is best learnt about from clinical records if obtainable. Gynaecological pathology and terminology are mysterious to most women." (Garrey:66)

Even with simple information like the date of the last period, doctors are advised not to accept the woman's word. Women are expected to be unable to report on their cycle length, and Jeffcoate suggests that when investigating symptoms related to the menstrual cycle "if reliable information on menstruation is needed, ask the husband!" (p.4)

Various studies (eg Stimson and Webb 1975; Graham and Oakley 1981) have identified the methods by which the passivity of patients within medical consultations is achieved. Richman and Goldthorp (1977) have looked specifically at gynaecological consultations, and found in their 1974 study that only two-thirds of the patients gave recognisable reasons for their treatment. Over one third did not know which organs were being treated or removed. They suggest that "the patient's ignorance of her anatomy facilitates the gynaecologist's sequencing techniques" - that is, his reorganisation of the information given him

into some kind of explanation.

One striking finding was that "the word most frequently used by all gynaecological patients is 'yes' and its equivalents" - the patient is not allowed to take the initiative in defining her own troubles. Thus it is interesting that my texts start their discussions with such definite assertions that women are likely to be unable to discuss menstruation in an appropriate way.

I found, further, that women were expected to attempt to mislead the doctor. This appears very clearly in relation to menstrual pain. Jeffcoate thinks that dysmenorrhoea "may... be an excuse to avoid doing something which is disliked" and that "a description of intense pain dating from the menarche should raise doubts about its reality" (p.538). Since individual men, too, expressed doubt about the reality of menstrual pain I will discuss this lack of empathy with women's pain as a general phenomenon in my chapter on pain. However a woman's word is doubted in a much more general way. Garrey, for instance, suggests that complaints of pain generally cannot be taken at face value, for "A neurotic patient will employ colourful imagery like 'red-hot'drill" (p.69)

Jeffcoate introduces his textbook with a section discussing psychosomatics in gynaecology where he sets out his view of his patients:

"A woman faced with unwanted responsibilities, or with

> any distasteful situation, often tries to escape by blaming genital organs about which there remains an air of mystery which secures for her the sympathy of other women or of the over-solicitous husband... The majority of women are unconscious of these factors in their illness and, when made aware of them... can adjust themselves to ensure a cure. There are a few, however, who deliberately set out to deceive." (p.2)

Women are also believed to lie about how much they are bleeding: "Sometimes patients give dramatic accounts of heavy loss which direct observation in hospital does not confirm." (Clayton and Newton:104).

Because of this problem, some of the texts give estimates of the proper number of towels or tampons women should use per period.

> "About a dozen internal tampons might be used for one menstruation; but the patient's estimate of loss may be unreliable, especially if she uses phrases like 'torrential' or 'welling up'". (Garrey:67)

> "The previously normal pattern should be ascertained and an attempt made to estimate the blood loss from the increase in the number of towels used. In this respect some patients will use words like 'flooding' and 'coming up like a well', giving an impression of haemorrhage not supported by appearances or by the haemoglobin level." (Garrey:86)

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Jeffcoate reckons that women should use 3 "diapers" (an unusual term, surely) or tampons in 24 hours, two by day and one at night, and should use up to 12 to 15 for one period. (Jeffcoate:87)

It is difficult to see what interest a woman would have in persuading a doctor that she was bleeding very heavily, if there was no real problem behind it. Heavy bleeding appears to be difficult to treat successfully, short of hysterectomy, and one cannot help wondering if this explains the hostility expressed towards women complaining of it.

Gynaecologists seem to regard their patients as persons without honour. Scully and Bart (1978) summarize the doctors' attitude to women as follows: "She is considered a cranky child with a uterus." But my texts seem to see women as positively calculating. Not so much irresponsible as actively using their bodies in an attempt to avoid work, or some other "distasteful situation": sexual intercourse perhaps? One of the tasks of gynaecologists appears to be to prevent women from "using it to get out of things" - the accusation from male culture.

Beard et al's (1977) study of pelvic pain in women shows this motivation. They conclude that "the basic psychological defect of these women appears to be difficulty in externalising their feelings when subjected to emotional stress." They focus their problems in the pelvis because "a number of our patients undoubtedly used the symptom,

whether consciously or unconsciously, as a reason for avoiding close physical involvement with their partners" (p.570).

I find this prophesy particularly alarming:

> "If psychosexual disturbance can be one of the causes of pelvic pain, then it seems likely that with the greater sexual freedom of our society this symptom may become a more common complaint in gynaecological and surgical clinics."

Why would sexual 'freedom' make women sicker? Unclear though the doctors' image of society is, it is plain that they see themselves as maintenance engineers working to ease heterosexual relations.

There is an element of distrust of the patient within much medical discourse. However I think that <u>women's</u> honour presents special problems. In patriarchy, what makes a woman honourable is that she has some satisfactory relationship to a man. A woman's honour refers to her success as a virginal daughter or as a faithful wife (Rich 1980). It is very clear that gynaecologists regard the majority of their patients as suffering from social or psychological problems stemming from failure properly to fulfil the feminine role. Thus they are by definition under suspicion of being dishonourable in this specific sexual sense - how can they be expected to act with honour in their interaction with the doctor?

One way that patients can escape from this suspicion is to get better quickly and as a result of the treatment the doctor deems suitable for her condition - the sicker a woman is, the more she is suspected of neurosis, or of some kind of evasion. "Intractable" comes to refer equally to her personality as to her medical condition.

There is perhaps also a kind of double standard operating within this system, for a wife should be accorded some respect. Doctors may, like men generally, see women in general in one way, while maintaining a different view of particular women - their own wives, or women like their wives in some way. Thus a woman who behaves in a feminine fashion may draw out kindness and concern, a protective attitude, for she will be seen as likely to be striving to have honour as a male-defined woman.

Manner

Another aspect of the interview situation which came to my notice in the course of studying these texts is the issue of how, in a very general sense, gynaecologists should speak to women. This is not always regarded as a problem. I was very struck, on reading a text published in 1948, by Wilfred Shaw, that he devoted considerable space to a discussion of how the doctor could investigate very personal aspects of a woman's life without giving offense. "First endeavours should... be directed towards gaining the patient's confidence; details in the history can conveniently be left for later." (Shaw 1948:100). Of the

more recent texts, only Barnes includes a statement equivalent to this concern: "Many women find it difficult to discuss the intimate details of their lives and tact and discretion are needed". (p.26)

Garrey's section on these issues, in which he does recommend that the patient needs privacy, time and sympathy, begins with these statements:

> "The ancient Greeks believed that the behaviour pattern of hysteria was related to disease of the womb (Gk: hystera, womb). A woman discussing some condition related to her genital tract will often show signs of stress - embarrassment, fear, shame." (p.66)

Given what we have learnt about the etiquette of menstruation, it is plain that this etiquette must be negotiated in some way for a gynaecological consultation between a woman and a male doctor to take place. Indeed even with a woman doctor, the doctor's office may well be seen as a public place, and the doctor is certainly initially a stranger. Most women do not ordinarily discuss menstruation or refer to their sexual and reproductive organs in any way except in the most private of interactions: it is hardly to be wondered at that it can present problems. Garrey's implication that women may appear embarrassed by discussing what he calls the "genital tract" as a result of some direct relationship of the womb to the mind is a startling example of a mode of thought which ignores what must be obvious social phenomena to

place blame on the individual patient.

Jeffcoate, interestingly, advises that doctors should adopt a "coldly scientific attitude", rather than being excessively familiar and addressing women as "my dear" or "mother" (Jeffcoate:3). That this advice should be thought necessary is interesting. Perhaps we are seeing a shift in the personal style of doctors, from the purely paternalistic-authoritarian to a more removed, godlike stance? Perhaps this is found to be a more successful method of bracketing-out the medical consultation from other male-female interactions. It is notable too that Richman and Goldthorp observed that ordinary everyday politeness, a greeting like 'Good day', is not normal in gynaecology, while, they say, it is routine in ante-natal clinics.

There seems also to be considerable variation among the texts as to what kinds of questioning women should be put through. I have an impression of a trend towards more questions aimed specifically at finding out about the patient's sex life. Some texts (Llewellyn-Jones 1982: Styles 1982) also express an assumption that women with menstrual pain are likely to be sexually maladjusted in one way or another without spelling out a method of investigation.

Jeffcoate, whose first edition came out in 1957, and is therefore the second oldest text, suggests quite other

types of questioning as appropriate to the gynaecological interview:

> "Why does she go out to work and who looks after the children while she does?... Why is she worrying about a trivial symptom or is it her mother worrying on her behalf?"

Two from a long list (p.3) The change we see here is only that the prescription for healthy femininity goes beyond a concern for their performance as a mother to a focus on their attitude to sex.

The idea seems to be that confession may have some therapeutic value in itself. Like religious confession, this process gives the confessor, the doctor, a great measure of power over the patient - it contains the potential to be a very humiliating experience for the woman.

While on the subject of the generally invasive nature of the gynaecological examination, I was appalled to find two of my six texts suggesting examination under anaesthesia as a useful procedure. Llewellyn-Jones recommends it for cases of irregular menstruation in adolescence which do not respond to treatment (p.249). It is not explained what is being looked for in this way. Dewhurst suggests that when investigating secondary amenorrhoea, "In many unmarried women it is better to perform (the vaginal examination) under anasthesia" (p.64). Better for whom, one wonders, given that general anasthetics are by no means without

risk?

I was interested to find in a 1969 article on pelvic pain, that Jeffcoate cautioned against the use of examination under anaesthetic by the gynaecologist "in doubt or too hurried to 'listen' to and analyse the patient's story". He cited two cases he had known of women who died after a doctor ruptured an ectopic pregnancy in this way, and notes that a cyst could also be ruptured. This seems an extreme case where medical technique is used in an attempt to avoid problems created by the etiquette of the power relations between women and men.

9.3 MENSTRUAL PROBLEMS

These texts appear to have difficulties in the definition of every kind of menstrual problem. Both menstrual pain and 'premenstrual tension' are areas where there is a basic struggle over whether they are to be seen as normal parts of life, as illnesses, or perhaps as some intermediate phenomenon. Each of these is discussed in a separate chapter. The next most common menstrual disorders are amenorrhoea (no periods) and excessive menstrual bleeding (also called menorrhagia or dysfunctional menstrual bleeding).

With both these conditions, the doctors' first concern is to eliminate the possibility that they are a sign of some

underlying disease. Amenorrhoea can be produced by a very wide range of systemic diseases, while excessive menstrual bleeding can be a symptom of uterine cancer, among other illnesses. Both polyps and fibroids (myomata) can produce heavy bleeding, but these should be possible for the gynaecologist to feel during the standard pelvic examination, so present fewer problems of diagnosis.

Patients with amenorrhoea may undergo a number of tests to seek out any underlying causes - with excssive bleeding, after a simple pelvic examination, a "D and C" (dilation and curettage) is the usual next step. This can diagnose cancer of the endometrium, but is also held to be curative in some cases. Richman and Goldthorp write that "The often prescribed D and C has much the same medical curative status as ECT (electro convulsive therapy) has in psychiatry". There is much disagreement about its effectiveness, and it undoubtedly holds some ritual meaning beyond this.

If no 'cause' can be found, the doctors acknowledge that treating either problem is quite unlikely to be effective. In many cases the conditions will resolve themselves spontaneously, and the doctors therefore cannot know whether any treatment has in fact made a difference (Clayton and Newton:104). Both conditions are said to be frequently psychologically caused. Which comes first, inability to treat, or the psychological label, I do not know. Garrey writes:

> "The root cause of dysfunctional bleeding is often psychological and no treatment aimed to the uterus will cure the patient. Also, there is a tendency especially in the younger woman towards a spontaneous return to a normal cycle." (Garrey:87)

Of amenorrhoea, Llewellyn-Jones writes in different language:

> "once chromosomal and congenital abnormalities are excluded as causes of amenorrhoea, over 60 per cent of cases are due to hypothalamic malfunction. These are mainly due to environmental and psychosomatic (emotional) factors..." (p.84).

There are a number of psychological mechanisms which are said to cause amenorrhoea, among them stress, loss of weight, pseudo-pregnancy. Amenorrhoea is only to be treated if the woman wishes to become pregnant.

It is not clear to me what the psychology of 'dysfunctional uterine bleeding' is supposed to be - no author goes into any detail. Whatever it is, it must be very common. Dewhurst says that this category covers 10% of new gynaecological patients (p.606).

Llewellyn-Jones states rather generally that "Anxiety states, marital disharmony, submerged fears, separation, over-work and sexual frustration may lead either to amenorrhoea or to abnormal uterine bleeding." (p.75). It is remarkable how lightly some doctors assume some

undisclosed psychological cause. Introducing a recent book on psychology and gynaecological problems, R.W. Beard refers in passing to "conditions with a primary psychological aetiology such as menorrhagia" (1984:x).

Again there is thought to be a problem of definition. Four authors estimate the volume of blood which is lost in normal menstruation, presumably in the hope of these estimates acting as some sort of control.

Quantity of blood normally lost:
Barnes : 6 to 170cc, average 50cc
Clayton and Newton : 30 to 90ml fluid, of which half is blood
Garrey : 1 to 7 oz, 30 to 200ml
Llewellyn-Jones : 10 to 120ml, average 50ml

The treatment of women with dysfunctional uterine bleeding is confused by the fact that the emphasis is on investigation for other underlying disease. Once this has been concluded (a lengthy process), a woman is given various hormones to suppress the bleeding, and if that does not work (and there is every indication that it will not), she may be offered a hysterectomy.

It is not at all clear to me whether or not the doctors believe that excessive bleeding is in itself at all damaging to women's health. There is some discussion of the problem of anaemia, but apparently not all women with

this problem become anaemic. Perhaps doctors do not concern themselves with this question because women themselves regard excessive bleeding as a problem. Thus we get a strangely flat statement like this from Clayton and Newton: "In exceptional cases hysterectomy is required". (p. 105) No way of telling in what way these cases are exceptional, or by whom the operation is "required". Garrey is more enthusiastic - under the heading "Total hysterectomy" he writes:

> "This is the best treatment for the woman over 45 and is a last resort for the young patient who has not responded to drug treatment. It puts a stop to the constant blood loss and gets rid of an organ which is a common site of cancer." (Garrey:88)

Radiotherapy (that is, the use of radium to induce an early menopause), seems to be a treatment which is going out of fashion. It is only mentioned in Dewhurst, and is said to have a small place in the treatment of women over 40, though he acknowledges that it tends to cause cancer.

Llewellyn-Jones includes an argument against the use of hysterectomy, which he says has been excessive, criticising this practice mainly on the basis that the problems for which it is used are often psychological (p.81).

There is certainly a contradiction in the gynaecologists' practice, for they are forever advocating the treatment of problems they see as psychogenic with surgery or with hormones. They hardly ever suggest any form of

psychotherapy, unless you count pep talks from themselves: for example Jeffcoate suggests that

> "The best hope of limiting the intensity of spasmodic dysmenorrhoea, or the incapacitation it causes, lies in teaching young girls a proper outlook on menstruation, sex and health in general..." (p.529)

Psychotherapy, though, or any deep exploration of the woman's feelings, is never mentioned.

This seems to have been a special feature of gynaecology for a long time - Barker-Benfield (1975) notes that in the 1860s and early '70s doctors "began to practice the surgical treatment of the psychologic disorders of women." Barker-Benfield analyses this practice in late 19th century America as an attempt to re-establish control over women. Of course this was before any 'talking therapy' was widely practiced or accepted. In modern gynaecologists this attitude is more surprising in its illogicality.

Angela Coulter's work on hysterectomy (1984) brings out the problems here. Feminists have tended to focus on attitudes like that of Garrey quoted above, where doctors see the womb as an unnecessary cancer-prone organ. In the US especially, there has seemed to be an alarming enthusiasm for hysterectomy (eg Morgan 1978; Daly 1978). But at the same time, Coulter found that many British women who suffer from heavy bleeding find that doctors are unsympathetic and uninterested in giving treatment. Hormonal treatments are a

possibility, but not especially safe or effective, and women often want a hysterectomy as the only final solution to a debilitating problem.

The texts I looked at spell out exactly the attitude such women report - that excessive bleeding is unimportant unless it produces some 'objective' measureable effect like a low blood iron level, and that women who worry about it have probably produced it themselves by their own neurosis. No account is taken of the discomfort and inconvenience of this condition, whether or not it also has other physical effects (which women complain of in some of the letters received by Denise Flowers in relation to the campaign against VAT on sanitary wear). These problems are of course exacerbated by the etiquette of secrecy which men require of women in this society.

My overriding impression of the material in gynaecology texts on menstrual problems is that very little is known about them, and that little more is likely the learnt unless some major change of attitude comes about for the texts are full of 'let-out clauses' providing excuses for their lack of attention to these problems.

9.4 DON'T LISTEN TO YOUR MOTHER

One special aspect of the gynaecologists' attitude to menstrual problems, as opposed to the general male

attitude, is that the doctors seem particularly concerned to blame the mother for a woman's problems. Perhaps this arises from the doctors' need to establish their own authority in this area - they must therefore attack alternative sources of information. The attack on mothers is most prominent in relation to menstrual pain.

The Lennanes wrote in their extraordinary article, which criticized medical attitudes to women (1973), that given the evidence it is remarkable that the medical fraternity do not declare dysmenorrhoea an inherited disorder.

But they do not. The first place I came across the line of thinking they favour was in Margaret Mead's "Male and Female" (1950). She writes that:

> "Careful studies of dysmenorrhoea in America have failed to reveal any consistent factors among women who manifest pain except exposure during childhood to another female who reported menstrual pain". (p.208)

Mead gives no references for these "careful studies" nor do the doctors who I suppose to be the originators of this theory. Jeffcoate states:

> "A dysmenorrhoeic mother usually has a dysmenorrhoeic daughter. A girl who is an only child is more likely than most to suffer from dysmenorrhoea." (p.538)

McClure Brown agrees. On the psychological factors relevant to the aetiology of period pain he writes:

> "Often the patient is an only child, the 'apple of her mother's eye' who has been coddled and protected from

> childhood, and whose every minor upset has been a cause for maternal concern" (p.91).

So the mother's relationship to her daughter in itself can create pain in the daughter. And a girl whose mother is especially concerned for her welfare is particularly likely to suffer!

To be more specific, mothers may give their daughters a 'bad attitude'. An article in Update (Styles, 1982) states that "... factors that undoubtedly contribute to the severity of the pain are the patient's attitude to menstruation and in particular the preparation she received for it from her mother" (p.1694)

There is, the gynaecologists say, no pain in cycles where ovulation does not take place: and they claim that girls never ovulate during their first few menstrual cycles. Therefore:

> "Dysmenorrhoea during the first few cycles may suggest it is due more to the incorrect attitude of the girl and her parents than to painful contractions of the uterine muscle. In such cases it may be manifest when interviewing the parents that the girl has been influenced by hearing graphic accounts of her mother's suffering, which not surprisingly may affect her own. It may not be easy to undo the harm done in this kind of case, but a simple explanation of the physiology of menstruation given sympathetically should help." (p.31)

This passage is part of one third of a page devoted to period pain in a book of over 600 pages, a respected gynaecology text. Dewhurst clearly thinks that period pain is imaginary and probably a female plot.

Llewellyn-Jones' book follows the same line of thought. Dysmenorrhoea comes in a chapter on adolescence:

> "The severity of the pain is influenced by cultural attitudes, particularly those of the child's mother and older sisters". (p.249)

So, some doctors think that mothers actually <u>create</u> their daughters' pains - other that they merely make them worse: they are unanimous that mothers are a crucial problem. Jeffcoate, who seems to be more openly engaged in sexual politics than most, remarks in a general way about psychosomatics in gynaecology that:

> "The mother who does not wish to lose her daughter by marriage, and the elderly husband who is afraid of losing the affections of his young wife, are particularly prone to encourage illness in the object of their affection". (p.2)

Gynaecological problems are suspected of being a form of indirect marriage-resistance. And in the case of period pains, this resistance cannot be in the interests of the daughter - for nothing but marriage could cure her:

> "It is important that the girl should realise that her complaint is likely to be shortlived and that immediate

> prospects of marriage and child-bearing justify the deferment of drastic measures." (p.539)

How is this mother-induced condition to be treated, if it can be treated? As we have seen, the 'girl' will be encouraged to confess, and then the doctor will attempt to inculcate a 'better attitude' in her. There is great emphasis upon this notion that a good attitude can be produced, and that pain free menstruation will follow.

I want to suggest that the crux of this practice is the denial to women of information about other women's experiences. Women who suffer pain with menstruation are presumably expected to lie to their daughters about it. And what exactly is this healthy attitude? That women bleed from the uterus every month during their fertile years is no big deal in itself - that is <u>not</u> what the problem is for doctors or for women. The problems are firstly, the fact that for many women it hurts, and secondly, the cultural requirement, the etiquette, that it should be kept secret from men. What women must be taught is, quite literally, to suffer in silence. They must be persuaded that their pain is their fault and that it is evidence of weakness or rebellion for women to refer publicly to menstruation at all. Women have to be persuaded to participate in the loud silence which surrounds menstruation. Mothers and daughters must learn that it is bad for them to communicate with one another about their similar bodies.

The content of a 'healthy attitude' in a discussion which precludes any challenge to patriarchal culture is silence. What is interesting and worth discussing about menstruation is the way in which it is used against women by men, and that is not on the agenda. Those gynaecologists who mention the cultural restrictions which surround menstruation brush them aside as if to say that only neurotic women would perpetuate these practices. Men, as usual, are absent from the picture.

This kind of mother-blaming is not confined to gynaecologists, but can be found running through much of what is written about menstruation. A pamphlet put out by Tampax Ltd., designed to help mothers explain periods to their daughters, nicely sums up the way in which the mother is trapped by the etiquette of menstruation:

> "Happily we now live in more enlightened times. Menstruation has now come to be recognised for what it is - a completely natural bodily function. No woman need feel 'unclean' or restricted during her period... Your daughter should be reassured of this - no one else need ever know that she has a period."

The mother is required to teach her daughter concealment without conveying a sense of shame - surely an impossibility.

I was most interested to see the question "what <u>is</u> a positive response to menstruation?" raised for once within a medical context, by Suzanne F. Abraham, in a recently-

published Handbook of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynaecology (1983).

Another twist to this tale of enforced betrayal of daughters by mothers can be found in Shuttle and Redgroves' The Wise Wound. In a long book, all about menstruation, they only mention the mother-daughter relationship twice, to quote other writers' negative remarks about it. Their hope appears to be for women to be cured by a new kind of heterosexual relationship. What they do focus on is the effect on children of both sexes of their mother's suffering. They feel that children are constantly being traumatised by their mothers' failures to acknowledge that they are menstruating.

It is striking, though, that interest is actually focused on the experience of the boy child (p.74). C.D. Daly, it seems, has created an entire system of psychoanalysis revolving around the trauma the mother's menstruation causes in boy children (p.55). And Shuttle and Redgrove devote several pages to a reanalysis of dreams by which they attempt to demonstrate that the infant Jung was traumatised by his mother's menstruation (pp 105-9).

What Shuttle and Redgrove seem to be concerned with is warning civilization that it must take account of the experience of menstruation or be in danger from menstruating women. As followers of psychoanalytic theory, they believe that human personalities are crucially formed

in early childhood. They see women during their paramenstruum (a term they take from Dalton which covers half one's menstruating life) as out of control, emanating dangerous influences, correctly perceived by men as threatening. The unfortunate infant is of course especially vulnerable to this monster, being in close contact with her. The obvious implication from what they say, admittedly not spelt out, is that women as mothers, having menstrual cycles, have driven men mad, and that is why men do not wish to know about menstruation.

Psychoanalysts have always been keen on blaming the mother: this is only an attempt to add sophistication to older theories. But the "menstrual influence" is such a vague idea that one can imagine it being used to explain more or less any disturbance in anyone.

This kind of theorising is particularly pernicious when it sets up the mother-daughter nexus as in some way explanatory of other social relationships. In fact the reverse is likely to be more nearly true - women's relationships to their daughters are very much determined by the requirements of partriarchal society.

Mary Daly (1978) has drawn attention to this phenomenon, where women, often mothers, are used as "token torturers" within patriarchal institutions. She discusses genital mutilation, also called female circumcision, in Africa, and footbinding in China - both ritually carried out by women.

In both these cases, a girl who had not undergone these mutilations would not be regarded as eligible to marry: certainly she could not make a 'good' marriage. When women must marry to survive, how many mothers will refuse to inflict such practices on their daughter? In the same way, everywhere, a woman who failed to train her daughter to survive in patriarchy, for instance who neglected to teach her the etiquette of menstruation, would merely expose her to ridicule or worse at the hands of men.

9.5 THE MEDICAL POINT OF VIEW

How are we to regard the medical mode of discourse on menstruation? Paula Weideger titles her chapter on this subject "Witch Doctors: The Gynaecologist as Shaman". The image of a Shaman fits in certain ways - gynaecologists do attempt to fulfill the function of reintegrating the deviant woman into her correct place in society, of producing words to reinterpret her experiences to her in such a way that they make sense. But the image one has of the Shaman (which may be incomplete itself) is that they are very successful healers, well-integrated themselves into their culture, well-accepted. Even within their own textbooks there is evidence that gynaecology does not work in quite this way: successful cures are rare. Beyond the textbooks there is a great deal of evidence that women are not satisfied with gynaecology - the movement for better women's health care is at the heart of the women's

liberation movement, and has had great influence (Marieskind 1975a; Rusek 1979).

Nor is this struggle anything new. Medical arguments were used in the nineteenth century to argue against women's rights, particularly women's right to education. When the achievements of a few women began to make the view that women were simply too stupid for higher education untenable, Edward H. Clarke at Harvard (1873) and Henry Maudsley (1874) in London produced theories about the development of the reproductive system which asserted that intellectual effort would permanently damage women's health (Burstyn 1980). A number of the earliest women doctors did research specifially to refute these arguments - they were also concerned in general to establish the normality of menstruation. Clelia Duel Mosher (1923: 1980) and Mary Putnam Jacobi (Walsh 1977; The Women's Medical Association of New York 1925) carried out surveys of women's menstrual experiences.

Feminist historians (Rugen 1979; Blake personal communication) suggest that this may have been one of the reasons for the male resistance to women becoming doctors - that for the first time women would be able to refute their misogynist arguments as professionals. This long history of resistance within medicine does not, however, seem to have had a great deal of impact on the ideas expressed in the texts I studied.

It is not, however, entirely straightforward to say what it is that feminists want of gynaecologists. There is a tension between two directions of analysis: firstly that men tend to focus on women's sexual organs as the cause of their problems, and to engage in invasive, often surgical treatment, which attacks the integrity of women's bodies (cf Raymond 1980; Daly 1978). Secondly it is also true that many women feel that doctors ignore everyday and indeed sometimes very serious health problems when they happen to women. But this contradiction is not profound. Gynaecologists do on the whole display an extraordinary lack of empathy with women.

An interesting perspective on gynaecology emerges when one looks by contrast at the way in which medicine attends to the male reproductive system. Naomi Pfeffer (1983, 1985), has recently drawn attention to the other side of the issue - that men's sexual and reproductive systems are represented as flawless. Researching infertility, she found that medical knowledge about men's problems, for example with the prostate gland, is at a very primitive level - even though such problems are extremely common. Men are evidently suffering physically from propaganda which benefits them socially.

Diseases of the male reproductive system are frequently categorised as belonging to other systems - there is no equivalent medical specialism to gynaecology, only 'urology'. Once we focus upon this refusal to acknowledge

any possible weaknesses or malfunctions in the male reproductive system, it becomes clear that an image of the female system as especially prone to problems depends upon an implicit comparison with the supposedly superior male. And that the widespread belief that women's reproductive systems are particularly elaborate and finely-tuned is a function of the fact that they have been studied extensively. Complexities appear when one looks at a thing in detail. Pfeffer's comparative approach produces extremely useful insights for the sociology of gender and of medicine.

The very existence of gynaecology sets up a group of people, surgeons in fact, for whom the female body is the field of their work - as Barker-Benfield found in the 19th century, their gaze has not been confined to the body, but has attempted to 'cure' "the very soul of woman" (Dr. Charles Meigs 1851). Marieskind points out how curious it is that it is quite taken for granted that women enter the medical system, in a sense, through their reproductive systems (Marieskind 1975b). Thus while the two analyses may conflict in certain cases, both are generally true, for the essential motivation of the profession of gynaecology is towards control, control over women.

Gynaecologists struggle with women for a monopoly on the right to distinguish the normal from the abnormal - to control the boundaries of normal femininity. Their writings are not always theoretically consistent, for what

they are engaged in is very much a practice: texts do not explain so much as impart a tradition. They tell what "it is usual" to do. This is one reason why it seems to be such a very closed, unchanging, system of thought.

In a sense, gynaecologists do the dirty work of the patriarchy, dealing in areas which are on the whole hidden from the male view. The speciality is not highly respected within the medical profession, perhaps exactly because it is only women over whom the gynaecologist can exercise his medical power.

Perhaps menstrual disorders are the dirtiest of the dirty work they must do, unredeemed as they are by direct connection to childbearing, unredeemed too by any potentiality for saving lives. Certainly menstrual problems are seen as evidence that the woman is in rebellion against, or failing at, her job of being female.

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SOCIAL MEANINGS OF MENSTRUATION:
A FEMINIST INVESTIGATION

By:

Sophie Katharine Laws

THREE VOLUMES: VOLUME 3

THE CLASH OF FEMALE AND MALE DEFINITIONS

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 10

MEN'S VIEWS OF MENSTRUAL PAIN:

A FAILURE OF EMPATHY

Menstrual pain seems to be a crucial example of the way in which men's and women's versions of the meaning of menstruation conflict. Women in Esther Merves' study said that pain or discomfort was one of the most common reasons why they would mention their menstrual periods to someone else. Surveys show that over half of all menstruating women experience some sort of discomfort with menstruation. And yet pain is very rarely referred to in the academic literature on menstruation.

The etiquette of menstruation generally appears to apply equally to menstrual pain. The majority of the men I interviewed had never heard mention of menstrual pain at their workplaces. As I questioned them, they often realised for the first time the concealment by women that this must signify.

Social reference to menstruation is most often implicit, silent, but women may be explicitly told not to mention it. A friend rang in to the personnel department of the large firm she was working for and reported that she was taking the day off because of period pains. The woman in the office said "You can't say that. You must say you've got a cold". When pressed, she agreed to put the truth on the

form, but she clearly expected some terrible consequence to follow from this.

Similarly, in social situations, women are unlikely to mention menstrual pain to male friends and acquaintances. Only a few of the men I interviewed, who had feminist friends who believed in speaking openly about such things, had heard women friends mention it. As one man put it:

> "... even close friends are not likely to come up and say to me, 'I've got a really bad period' - I mean it might come out in a discussion of... sexual feelings, or whatever, gradually...() in conversations about contraception or relationships or - in that way..." (M 10)

However it appears that a woman does generally tell a man she is in a heterosexual relationship with when she has pain. Not always, certainly, but among the young men I interviewed, this would be the norm. The existence of pain appears to make little difference to the rules of etiquette for menstruation generally.

In this chapter I shall set side by side data from individual male interviewees and from gynaecologists, as representing some elements of the complex and contradictory perceptions of menstrual pain among men in this society. One can describe a spectrum of views, from a straightforward disbelief in the existence of menstrual pain, through rationalisations of this disbelief such as the idea that

such pain is psychological, through also an acceptance that the pain exists, but is caused by failure to conform to sex role or to some other prescription for healthy living, to an acceptance of it as physical pain. After discussing these views, I will look briefly at how individual men relate to menstrual pain when it features in their personal lives. Finally I shall return to the issue of psychosomatic pain, to suggest that the notion of psychosomatics is a particularly important one to analyse in attempting to understand the sociology of gender and health and illness.

10.1.1 Basic Disbelief

Discussing pain generally, Ivan Illich (1976) identifies three problem areas. The first is that of the relation of pain to other ills; the second of language relating to pain - the overlap with a range of ideas such as grief, sorrow, anguish, hard work, trial, tiredness, evil, trouble, confusion. Finally he notes the problem of pain's "exceptional epistemological status" - that one cannot know another person's pain:

> "I am certain about the existence of their pain only in the sense that I am certain of my compassion for them" (p.141).

Thomas Szasz, too, has attempted to analyse the meaning of pain (1957). He sees one of the symbolic meanings of pain as a method of asking for help. It follows then that:

> "If the expression of pain is so fundamentally associated with asking for and getting help, it

follows that pain suffered in silence, or persistently unrelieved, may readily be interpreted as punishment." "In order to secure this help (with getting relief from pain and with dealing with the danger signalled by the pain) it is essential that the meaning of the dangerous state be conveyed to another person. Whether this is easy or difficult depends upon how well the persons who are interacting understand each other. The distinction between physical and mental pain presupposes a two-body frame of reference. Physical pain denotes agreement, and mental pain denotes disagreement between sufferer and observer." (p.86)

He therefore calls the notion of psychogenic pain a "pseudo-explanation" which hides a real failure to respond to the person's problem.

Hear now how men described male culture's attitude towards menstrual pain:

"A: I can remember that that was often a male reaction to period pains, that it was something that was not completely understandable, that it was something that was, that shouldn't happen, so therefore, men tended to think that it didn't happen, that it was something that women made up, to get out of things, or to sort of say, you know... I think a lot of men, I think I thought about it to an extent, and a lot of men probably still do, that it's something women do deliberately to cut themselves off from men to sort of make absolutely clear their

difference, and their power in that sort of situation, and that they can sort of use it as a way of exerting control of the situations. I mean I certainly thought that when I was very much younger, in my teens. I can remember feeling irritated, feeling annoyed, feeling that there was nothing... that I didn't have any control over the situation, and that it was something that women used to exert control."

I asked whether this related to sex in particular, or whether women were suspected of using it to get out of other things as well.

"A:... Mm it's difficult because, I mean, when I was, I suppose, in my mid-teens, when I started to go out with girls, it <u>was</u> something that girls did, or used, to have some sort of control over men in general. But I suppose that became much more personal in terms of the first sort of proper sexual relationships that I had in my late teens and early twenties, that it was something that meant I wasn't in control of the situation, or that... not even that, that the person I was involved with had actually more control of the situation than I did." (A 7)

This is backed up by another man:

"H: There's also a thing about men being very unsympathetic about it and... um... like if someone's got pains, backache or whatever because they're menstruating... and men being very unsympathetic. Bloody hell, it happens every month you know.() But also just that it's, it's a bit of a ... it's as

> inconvenient well not as inconvenient, it's also inconvenient for the male who's having to deal with being sympathetic when he,when it's very difficult for him to do so, it becomes uncomfortable for him as well, I won't say as uncomfortable as for the woman who's experiencing the pain... and also, um, the impression is a lot that... that men tend to think that women play on it, that they're menstruating and therefore they've got a bit of pain and they can accentuate that pain to certain benefits, to get time off work, to get... whatever." (H 6)

In the men's group discussion, men strive to empathize with women by producing analogies - one explains his idea that men should not be angry but should make allowances for pre-menstrual women by saying that if you've got a hangover, you need people to be a bit more tolerant of you (p.19). Another man complains that "you can't identify with it in the same way as if someone's got a cold, or the flu, or had a tooth out, or whatever it is" (p.18).

Gynaecology textbooks, as I have said, display the extreme lack of trust with which the doctor regards his female patients. Several texts suggest that there is a general problem about assessing women's claims to be in pain - Garrey (1978) has a full page entitled "complaints of pain", in which he suggests that "the severity of pain can be judged to some extent by its effects on the patient's behaviour. She should not have to go off work for

'normal' dysmenorrhoea". One must learn to spot the neurotic: Garrey gives this guidance -"A neurotic patient will employ colourful imagery like 'red-hot' drill" (p.69).

The section of this book which deals with dysmenorrhoea contains this interesting statement:

> "A moralistic attitude should be avoided. 'Pain' comes from the Latin word poena, punishment)... and the doctor should never imply that he believes the pain to be 'all in the mind'". (Garrey:117)

Jeffcoate writes as follows on 'congestive dysmenorrhoea':

> "In most cases... the congestion is 'functional' (even hypothetical) and is due to over-anxiety, emotional instability, inability to cope with domestic responsibilities, a sedentary life, mental and sexual upsets... Daily cold baths or showers the inter-menstrual phase may tone up both circulation and mental processes." (p.543)

There are, as we have seen, some special cases where the doctors are particularly suspicious - when their theory denies a woman's experience:

> "Dysmenorrhoea during the first few cycles may suggest it to be due more to the incorrect attitude of the girl and her parents towards menstruation than to painful contractions of the uterine muscle. In such cases it may be manifest when interviewing the parents that the girl has been influenced by hearing graphic accounts of her mother's suffering, which not surprisingly may affect her own." (Dewhurst:31)

> "A description of intense pain dating from the menarche should raise doubts about its reality. True dysmennorrhoea reaches a maximum between 18 and 24 and thereafter diminishes." (Jeffcoate:538)

In an otherwise quite practical article on pelvic pain, Jeffcoate writes that "the commonest form of alleged dysmenorrhoea encountered in practice is a unilateral pain in one or other iliac fossa." (1969) Since he had just been lamenting the degree of medical ignorance which existed about the anatomy of the nervous system to the pelvis, that "alleged" seems particularly uncalled for.

Most of these texts also refer to low pain threshold as a possible cause of menstrual pain. Barnes writes that women with primary dysmenorrhea (that is, pain starting with their first period) "have a lowered threshold for pain and this may be caused by emotional disturbance or boredom with monotonous work" (1980:44).

The notion of low pain threshold is rather difficult to pin down. Certainly, with an individual, it is possible to say that their experience of pain may vary as a result of factors outside of the level of stimulus. But how can anyone judge the level of pain one person feels against that felt by another? When low pain threshold refers to a group of people (eg young women) or to a category of illness (eg dysmenorrhoea), I can only understand it as a judgement of prejudice. The doctors somehow <u>know</u> that

the pain can't be that bad, therefore the women must be oversensitive.

Gynaecologists' ideas about menstrual pain cannot simply be summed up as disbelief, though plain disbelief does seem to be the position from which they start. If the pain is real in any sense, it is seen as the creation of the woman, either individually, or as part of the category 'modern women'. Women with menstrual pain are faced with a network of interlocking ideas - all present both in everyday male discourse and in medical 'knowledge'.

10.1.2 Psychosomatic

The notion that menstrual pain is in the mind is expressed in a number of ways. The men's group discussion produced two of them:

> "- the other thing is how much outside factors actually affect someone's periods. If they're feeling fit and happy and healthy, and life is generally wonderful, or, then, do periods fly by without anything, without anyone really noticing? On the other hand...
>
> - stress relating to periods
>
> - right. And does stress ultimately reflect itself in periods whereas in men it reflects itself in other ways...? Certainly periods do become heavier, or they don't have their periods, or they just go on for longer and longer... more or less any possible variation seems to occur if a woman's having particular problems." (p.18)

> "-... I would suspect that for women if having a period is seen as a problem by society in general, is seen as having a problem and if you treat it as a problem as an individual, that could definitely cause problems itself, a sort of cyclical thing... I mean there's no way of really finding out how that operates..." (pp 11/12)

The following speech from one of the men I interviewed shows how he feels he should offer me the psychosomatic theory as well as the one he had evidently been operating with himself:

> "... I've put it down to bodily, I suppose, physical aspects - hormonal balance and so on, and to some extent maybe possibly genetic things. I've got children and they, three daughters, who are menstruating and they've had a rough deal... hereditary, coming from X, probably. A couple of them have got heart murmurs, for instance, nothing serious, like X... that was my thinking... obviously I now don't accept the concept that there is anything that is purely physical, obviously the attitude that you approach something in will influence how you personally perceive something, how you perceive pain, in that sense. Whether there are circumstances in which X was living with me, were such that, the stress around her was particularly accentuated at a time when maybe her body was dealing with its natural function. .. whether that was exaggerating other tensions I

don't know. You have to investigate that proposition ..." (N 4)

It is striking that heredity never seems to be investigated in relation to menstrual pain, although mothers are frequently blamed for inculcating wrong attitudes into their daughters, or indeed for teaching them to have pain by letting them see their own. The possibility that some kind of predisposition to menstrual pain might be passed on genetically (through the father as well as the mother, obviously) does not seem to have been considered. A large US study (Chern et al 1980) has looked at inheritance in relation to age at menarche, length of menstrual bleeding and age at menopause,and found significant correlations from mother to daughter. But these researchers did not look at menstrual pain. This is a point made in the Lennannes' important article (1973) in which they argued - for the first time in a medical journal - that doctors' insistence that dysmenorrhoea, along with nausea in pregnancy, pain in labour and infantile behavioural disturbances, are psychogenic, might be a "manifestation of sexual prejudice".

Jeffcoate (1975) sets out his view that this is a problem of personality as follows:

"Menstruation is frequently accompanied by minor physical and nervous disturbances... The degree of disturbance, however, depends to a large extent on the individual's outlook on this physiological process,

> and on her determination not to allow it to interfere with her normal life. Highly strung and emotional women exaggerate the significance of menstruation while well-balanced individuals disregard it. In Britain and the USA 50% of women of less than 30 years of age experience aching or pain in the lower abdomen, pelvis or back before or during menstruation." (p.87)

And this kind of attitude has a great deal of influence. Whisnant, Brett and Zegans quote the following passage from a Kimberley-Clark Corporation leaflet designed to educate young girls about menstruation:

> "A goodly share of that discomfort is in the mind. For modern doctors know that fretting can cause sickness, even pain, when there's no physical cause for either." (1975:817)

Whisnant et al's analysis shows how young girls are urged to manage physical symptoms through what is essentialy 'mind over matter', in just the same way as they are encouraged to manage the practical etiquette.

Linda Gannon (1981) has written a very interesting survey of the evidence for a psychological aetiology of menstrual disorders, looking at the studies doctors refer to and testing the adequacy of their methodology. She notes several ways in which studies comparing levels of 'neuroticism' with menstrual symptoms tend to produce self-fulfilling prophecies. Often researchers test out a great many correlations, for example Gruba and Rohrburgh tested

160, and found only 16 to be significant. They then reported these positive correlations and not those found not to occur. This is bad practice when actually the assumption the researchers begin with is that the correlations do exist.

She also found three important cases where researchers had reported results which fitted their hypotheses regardless of the lack of actual findings to back them up from their experiments. There is a tendency to ascribe causation where only correlation can be shown. Levitt and Lubin (1967), for example, found a correlation between negative attitudes towards menstruation and reports of worse menstrual symptoms. They conclude that "This appears to support the gynaecologists' contention that an unwholesome attitude towards menstruation may be involved in the etiology of menstrual complaints." As Gannon points out, "such conclusions are particularly unwarranted when common logic supports causality in both directions".

The terminology used is interesting: the term 'psychosomatic', which at least acknowledges that the body is involved, only appears a few times in the texts I studied. Far more frequently, the term used is simply 'psychological'. Collins English Dictionary says that this means: 1. of or relating to psychology; 2. of or relating to the mind or mental processes; 3. Having no real or objective basis; 4. affecting the mind. So the doctors' ideas have not strayed far from the commonsense male belief that women put it on.

Gynaecologists never recommend that women suffering from these complaints be sent for psychiatric treatment beyond "reassurance" from themselves. Interestingly, some women psychologists in the USA have recently taken up the gynaecologists' theories and have tried to develop treatments from them - involving women in discussions about menstruation, and teaching them 'autogenic' relaxation methods (eg Heczey, 1980). This sort of training teaches people to bear pain better - it does not prevent them from feeling it (Weisenberg 1977, p.1032).

If the doctors treat women at all, it is usually with surgery or with hormones. One operation which used to be used to treat severe menstrual pain is called presacral neurectomy - the relevant nerves are cut near the spinal column. Four of the texts I studied mentioned it as a last resort, though two argued against its use. Jeffcoate writes that because it is only used after simpler measures have failed "it is usually reserved for the hopelessly neurotic type of patient" (p.540). This kind of cheerfulness about the use of major surgery to placate women seen as actually mentally ill is most frightening.

10.1.3 Stereotyping the Sufferer

This is the gynaecologists' speciality. The very narrow image gynaecologists have of the kind of woman who has 'true dysmenorrhoea' is not one many people outside of medicine share. Women understand its consequences - that most women cannot get gynaecologists to take their pains

seriously - but often do not know the cause.

The texts I looked at see menstrual pain primarily as a complaint of adolescence. Dewhurst only discusses dysmenorrhoea under the heading of "Puberty and its disorders". Other writers have various estimates as to the age group of women who suffer dysmenorrhoea: Llewellyn-Jons, 15-25; Jeffcoate, 18-24; Garrey, 16-26. Barnes says it "tends to lessen after 25 and disappear after 30". It is not entirely clear to me where this belief comes from. Perhaps as gynaecologists never see older women with dysmenorrhoea because such women will already have learnt that they will get no help from them. This may be connected to their other belief that childbirth, at least "usually", cures the pain.

But the descriptions of the dysmenorrhoea patient are more detailed than this. Barnes writes that "it is commonest in single women and in infertile married women", and that "Women with dysmenorrhoea often lead a sedentary life with lack of fresh air and physical exercise" (p.44). Garrey considers that:

> "There is no characteristic personality or physique but the hysterical patient will make the most of her dysmenorrhoea as she will of any other gynaecological complaint." (p.117)

In this he is in a minority. As we saw in the last chapter, attention is focused upon the 'girl's' relationship with her mother, and the mother is held to

teach her daughter to feel pain, either by example or by excessive concern for her well-being.

In a recent (1981) article on the subject, M.W.P. Carney asserts that "This syndrome seems to be particularly common in introverted intellectualized neurotic women of obsessive personality" (p.107).

I found that most of the men I interviewed had not considered why one woman suffers from pain when another does not - they took it more or less as given. Perhaps the gynaecologists' particular position encourages them to produce general theories of this kind.

10.1.4 Failure to Conform to Sex Role

The most blatant and widespread example of this thinking is the doctors' insistence that having a baby - as they see it, letting you body do what it is intended for - cures menstrual pain. The explanations offered for this idea, where explanations are thought necessary, are at odds with one another. Barnes suggests that this may be so "possibly because the parous uterus is more vascular and does not become ischaemic" (p.44). Garrey, on the other hand, looks for an explanation in "the psychological changes of motherhood" (p.117).

It seems that in the past it was claimed that marriage alone would cure period pain. Shaw (1948) writes that "almost all married women will say that they have not

suffered so much from dysmenorrhoea since marriage" (p.346). None of my later authors go so far, though Jeffcoate thinks marriage may have an effect:

> "Marriage may cure by removing the tension of a long engagement and by providing happy security; on the other hand, if it proves disharmonious, it can cause dysmenorrhoea." (p.538)

So although childbirth is not listed among the cures to be offered to women, it would be logical if it was and in practice doctors do recommend it. Jeffcoate even provides, under the heading "You need a baby!", a polemic against doctors advising women to have babies. He suggests that:

> "The nervous and physical reserves of some women are limited and they can only tolerate a relatively easy and sheltered life... The woman who cannot adjust herself to being without a baby may be the very one who fails to adjust herself to having one." (p.2)

There is strong evidence (Snowden and Christian 1983) that this theory is simply not true as a general rule, although of course some women's menstrual pain may disappear or lessen after childbirth. I was most interested to read that Indian doctors nearly always advise marriage and childbirth as a cure for dysmenorrhoea. Mira Sadgopal (1983) notes the fact that few women in India seem to be told their pain is psychosomatic, as is so common in the West. She analyses this as follows:

> "The expectation that women will of course want to get

> married and have children is so much a part of social tradition that this is accepted as the single most universal solution for dysmenorrhoea. Doctors have no second thoughts in recommending it...
>
> Can the universal advice that dysmenorrhoea is cured by marriage and giving birth be seen in isolation from women's position in society, and her nearly inevitable imprisonment in the home?"

A complaint closely related to dysmenorrhoea, intestinal pain associated with menstruation, produces statements which show other ways in which doctors expect women to conform to their sex role. This is only dealt with in two texts, although Llewellyn-Jones writes that it is "especially common in women aged 20 to 60, who often have a background of marital stress or sexual frustation." (p.74) However:

> "Treatment is unsatisfactory and many patients have to learn to live with their disorder, until their domestic problems are resolved. Unfortunately the condition may persist even then, and since many patients have had a variety of surgical procedures, may become fixed in the patient's personality. Recently, amitriptyline (a tricyclic antidepressant) has been used..." (Llewellyn-Jones p.74)

Jeffcoate also describes the patient with this complaint:

> "The subject is nearly always the over-anxious type, finds it difficult to face up to her responsibilities, gives a history of several operations (including

> appendicectomy) and probably has an oversympathetic husband or mother."

Women will suffer if they fail to have happy marriages, enjoy sex, enjoy housework, or if they forget never to listen to their mothers.

The notion that specifically sexual maladjustment is at the root of menstrual pain seems to be a new one and to be growing in influence. Llewellyn-Jones, first edition 1970, advises that the investigation of dysmenorrhoea should feature centrally "an assessment of the child's and her mother's attitude to sexual matters" (p.250). A summary article in Update published in May 1982, recommends that women complaining of dysmenorrhoea should be asked to take part in an "exploration of attitudes to menstruation, sexual development and sexual activity" (Styles, p.1694).

'The right attitude', which gynaecologists regard as essential to painfree menstruation, also appears frequently in their chapters on sexuality. Women's sexual problems apparently generally derive from wrong thinking on their part, or, again, from an unfortunate upbringing.

Pennelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove, the authors of The Wise Wound, have different theories about how women's sexuality ought to be organised. They think that women should 'naturally' experience active heterosexual desire throughout the menstrual cycle, and that sex during menstruation is what is needed to cure period pain:

"In the human, or so it appears, the womb has become an organ particularly open to stimulation through the genital organs, and this is why if there is intercours during menstruation it can be exceptionally deep. Without practice, the rawly-open womb may react with pain and irritation; as it is immensely alive to all that goes on in the individual, if she is told she is disgusting at that time, it writhes and cramps in anger and disgust. If the truth is told, however, and sexual stimulation is gentle and gradual, sex at menstruation can build up to an experience with completely different dimensions from that of sex at other times of the cycle, as for instance at the child-offering time, the ovulation, a fortnight earlier.

If the sexual experience is not offered, the desire is there still, and the womb seems to cramp in unsuccessful attempts at orgasmic experience, and the result is spasmodic dysmenorrhoea. The orgasm cures." (pp 147/8)

Given how much male ideology sexualizes menstruation, and relates it to heterosexual intercourse specifically, it is not surprising that this conclusion could be arrived at. Some women may find that the muscle relaxation after orgasm relieves menstrual cramping, for a little while afterwards. It takes a masculine logic to conclude from this that what women need is more sex.

While in the modern period these ideas present themselves as new and 'progressive', one finds interesting echoes elsewhere. Both Hilda Smith and Patricia Crawford report that seventeenth century doctors "recommended sexual intercourse as a cure for menstrual disordres - matrimony for maids, vigorous sex for wives." (Crawford 1981). Margarita A. Kay (1981) found, too, that Mexican American women hold this belief. Sex, in these cases, is of course to take place at 'appropriate' times, not during the period.

Associated with these ideas are others which relate in a less straightforward way to women's sexual role.

10.1.5 Bad Living

Particularly in the older texts, gynaecologists recommend fresh air and exercise as solutions to menstrual pain. This is part of a general enthusiasm for outdoor exercise and a belief that it would cure all ills. But in the present day, when most people are able to take a reasonable amount of exercise, the constant recitation that it relieves pain participates in the myth that women spend their days in idleness. This notion comes up in the men's group:

> "- I often wonder how the western lifestyle affects us, the pain it causes on women, I mean I know that certain remedies for women that do suffer a lot of pain is actually to take loads of exercise... before the period starts... Because the pain is... really

coming away from the wall, that's what's actually causing the pain, that's the cramps, the contractions, and often apparently taking a lot of exercise is one remedy that's been pushed around certainly... by feminists... whether it works...

- develops the muscles so they don't get cramped?

- possibly, I don't really..." (pp 15/16)

Women athletes doing intensive training are often said to have fewer and lighter periods and less pain than other women - whether or not this is so, and also whether it is the result of training, I do not know. A woman with debilitating menstrual pain could find it very difficult to keep up a strict training programme. Shangold (1983) found that most women athletes report no change in their menstrual symptoms.

But I have found no evidence that an ordinary amount of general exercise, or the specific exercises which are prescribed from all sides for alleviating menstrual pain have any effect. The ideological basis of this notion can be seen in that the possibility that menstrual pain may be made worse by the heavy lifting and carrying which most women do as part of housework, or by the endless standing and limitation of mobility which women who work in shops, factories and offices must endure, is never considered.

Another kind of bad living which one man I interviewed held to be responsible for women's problems is an impure diet.

He was interested in 'natural' medicine:

"...could be useful in preventing and helping all sorts of complaints, which include women's complaints and menstruation, menstruation problems.

SL: Yes, and was it diet you thought was particularly successful?

H: Diet, to a large extent, to a great extent... exercise, also to a large extent... massage can be used both as a preventative and as an analgesic...

SL: so as a preventative, would that be about generally relaxing the person?

H: yeah, the person, and particular regions, the small of the back and the kidneys... and exercises, yoga exercises, for example, which act as a massage as well, which keeps your body in general good trim, so that any changes in the body can happen without too much... pain or whatever

SL: And the diet you'd use, would that be a general purifying diet?

H: Yeah, sort of, vegetarian, wholefoods, cutting out processed, refined foods, chemical foods, additives, all that sort of thing. Because that ties in with what I'd heard about the purifying of the body through menstruation, that if someone is eating a lot of chemical stuff, they're likely to have more impurities in their blood which... they'll probably have a heavier menstrual flow and more difficulty menstruating... and certainly animal products tend to create menstrual difficulties...

In fact women's complaints in general...probably a lot of men's complaints in the same region, although men seem to have less complaints in the reproductive system...

SL: you think eating meat really affects that?

H: Meat and cheese, and stuff?

SL: well I don't know...

H: There are a lot of women who've actually reverted to a diet in the lines that I've said have cured, if you like, menstrual problems... have cured menstruation. The problems which come with menstruation, they've managed to alleviate... and actually make more regular, that's another thing wich happens, the more balanced the diet is, the more sure they can be about when they're going to be, and they often go very much in line with the lunar phases, they either come at the new moon or the full moon, and fertility in conjunction..."

"... I don't know many women that don't have menstrual problems, or I haven't met many women that don't have. .. the ones that don't have, tend to be the people who are very careful about their diet, and the other things I mentioned, massaging and exercise.." (H 13/14)

The logic of this line of thinking is revealed in this man's response to a question about whether he saw menstrual blood as similar to other blood:

"No, I don't because I, it doesn't bother me so much but I think there are certain impurities which are... it's almost used as a ... what, an excretory mechanism

to get rid of certain impurities from within the body. And I believe that some women have heavier periods because they're trying to get rid of more impurities.. ... I know people who're on what I call a pure diet, a balanced diet, er, they tend to have very little menstrual bleeding... I know people that have actually controlled their menstrual bleeding by using diet, virtual control. So I tend to believe that theory of using the menstrual process because you are getting rid of something that is not needed, that's to say the lining of the uterus and in the fact I mean that, physically that is different to the blood when you cut your finger...

...there's a lot of waste material mixed up with the blood...

I mean, the, the lining of the uterus, the unfertilised eggs, are discarded because they're not needed and in a way they are foreign bodies, they are impurities. On that level certainly. But also as a sort of cleansing process of the blood. I don't know whether menstrual blood has been analysed to see if it contains..." (H 9/10)

The slippage between curing pain and "curing menstruation", and between an "impure" diet and an impure female body, is particularly evident in this man's thinking.

10.1.6 'Primitive' women don't have it

A further sophistication of this line of thought runs that menstrual pain results from some aspect of civilized

living, and that 'primitive' women, living in a supposedly more natural way, do not suffer from it.

The men's group refers to a mythologised primitive society:

> "... You take other primitive in inverted commas societies, and you know, pregnancy, isn't a problem, and quite often that's because the women are, like, a lot fitter and a lot stronger, and I mean it would be actually quite interesting to find out you know, how much menstruation actually affected those sort of women in societies where they were very active, I mean in the physical sense, rather than the actual taboos, I mean I've no idea how it actually affects them. But I mean you never, in the sporting pages, see women wingeing about 'oh I had my period, therefore I didn't run 2/10 of a second faster', it's not a problem that comes up on 'Sportsnight', or in the Olympics and yet all these women have periods... Olympic games, do you cut somebody out if they're going to have their period? (laughs) Is this what coaches and trainers do? I mean, presumably not... And (laughs)
>
> - No three gold medals. in <u>Our Bodies Ourselves</u> it quotes three gold medals won in the Olympics by women who were having periods...
>
> - mine of information, thank you..." (p.20)

The gynaecologists, too, hold this belief. Llewellyn-Jones writes:

> "Thus adolescents in 'primitive races' are said to suffer less severe pain than those in more sophisticated Western societies. Within single

> community the incidence of dysmenorrhoea is higher in the higher social classes." (p.249)

An older text claims that there is "reason to believe that its incidence has increased with the degree of civilisaton of the community" (Shaw:342). The thinking behind this, for the doctors, seems to be that women were designed for constant childbearing, and that a 'natural woman' would therefore be cured by the time she was an adult by early marriage and childbirth:

> "Presumably, if women married shortly after puberty and had a succession of pregnancies through the childbearing period of life spasmodic dysmenorrhoea would be extremely rare." (Shaw:346)

Are these statements entirely mythological - relating only to men's fantasies about what women's 'natural state' would be? Or when they say 'primitive societies' do they really mean that they believe women in underdeveloped countries do not suffer pain?

If it is the latter, the WHO's survey (Snowden and Christian 1983) gives no support to these ideas. It is true, however, that women on a very poor diet, and women living in very difficult conditions, for instance in a war zone, are likely to have scanty and irregular periods or none at all. Regular menstruation is a sign of health and women in underdeveloped countries are likely to suffer from malnutrition and the diseases of poverty which result from poor housing, bad water supply and so forth. Westerners are often happy to mythologise about 'primitive' societies

regardless of the realities of life in the poor countries. What these myths are certainly about is victim-blaming. Robert Crawford (1977) has written about modern 'health education' that it distracts attention from the social causes of ill health by focusing on the notionthat people are responsible for their own health. He sees a growing general tendency to link disease with affluence, and regards this as a politically-motivated procedure which diverts people from the perception that, actually, poverty causes illness.

We can see this process in operation in relation to menstrual pain - we are being told that our own failure to exercise, eat properly and think about sex in the right way are the causes, and, further, that this is the price we pay for not being peasants giving birth once a year in the corner of a field.

10.1.7 Physical Causes

We should perhaps beware of attending only to the explanations given for menstrual pain in the gynaecology texts I studied, for the treatments recommended may in fact point to another logic altogether. A successful treatment may undermine old theories of causation and this is to some extent occurring at present in relation to menstrual pain and the anti-prostaglandins. Writers like Budoff (1980) and Haynes (1982) are highly optimistic that the theory that the cause of menstrual pain is that an excess of certain prostaglandins causes overly intense cramping of

the uterus (Shangold 1983) will replace the sexist theories I have discussed. Perhaps they are right. Only three of my texts explain this theory and none give it alone, but time will tell for it is a relatively recent one.

All of these texts however, were enthusiastic about oral contraceptives as therapy for menstrual pain. The fact that these are very often effective would seem to undermine the claim that menstrual pain is a neurotic reaction, for surely such neurosis could not be remedied by hormones? One can only hope that such contradictions will in time come to have their effect.

10.2 INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIPS

As well as giving me information about male culture on menstrual pain, the men I interviewed also spoke more personally about how they themselves related to menstrual pain in women they knew. Whether or not men have anything to do with period pain varies greatly from one man to another. Partly it depends upon how much they are involved with women, and what the experience of the women they are involved with is. One man in the men's group said:

> "That's been the experience all the time of the person I've been closest to, so that's very dominant in my mind." (p 9)

However one of the younger men said that "most of the women I've known would tend to keep it very quiet" (K).

But the man himself has some control over this, as we saw when a man in the men's group described how he would in the past prevent a woman from telling him about it (see Chapter 4).

The men I spoke to reacted to menstrual pain in various ways. Several men spoke with straightforward sympathy about the women they knew and the pain they had seen them going through. However men also spoke of feeling resentful.

One man spoke about his feelings about his first girlfriend's menstrual pain:

> "Initially I'd talk... what's the problem? You've got a stomach upset? Take an Alka-Seltzer or something - I mean I would have been fairly... fairly unsupportive, with something I was ignorant of. I wouldn't have been very understanding of it - it was gradually having to educate me to understand what was happening, to take a more supportive role. It was easier once I understood what it was about - to try and take a more supportive role. It doesn't - I didn't experience that it got rid of my feelings of resentment - I still felt, slightly... (inaudible).
>
> And maybe in that way I resent menstruation in itself, I don't know, maybe in that kind of way that it is something that seemed to interfere with... our relationship and our enjoyment, and so on..." (M 6)

The men's group discussion brings out these issues:

"... And I'm not sure, other than verbally reacting differently, and being more conscious of the problem it created, I'm not sure in practical terms whether I actually have progressed much from that.

- I remember having... being... what do you say? extended stomach stroking periods, when I was... that was my role (laughter)

- gosh, yes, memories coming back! bloody hell yes (laughter)... yes, with the girl who found it very painful, yes...

- But what's strange about it is that when I say it, getting quite resentful about that... isn't that? I was just saying,that was my job, you know (laughs)

- yes,

- I'm glad it's not just me " (p.11)

"... whether anybody else feels a bit sort of...

- guilt, guilt

- No, not so much guilt, but lacking in ability to be able to respond properly, or to be sympathetic.

- Feel that the need to compensate is there...

- yes yes

- you were mentioning the stomach rubbing, and one of the interesting things is it's almost like an automatic response to me, because it's been knocked into me for so many years that this is how you respond to period pain, that if somebody complains of it, I almost, I mean my hand goes to... (laughter) I mean it's absolutely ridiculous, and what's strange is that

I mean I supppose I'd learnt a response that was supposed to be to do with providing a compensation for someone who was complaining of pain, but that response was only for one person, that was what that one person wanted, and so different people...

- you've got a role there, haven't you?

- ... and so different people, I suddenly think, oh god, what's my job? I don't know, because they actually mightn't want that...

- My response is to put the kettle on, fill two hot water bottles, ... one in front of the stomach, one at the back...

- you had a whole routine as well then?

- ... and then a back-scratching job. Well, more stroking, rather than scratching...

- rubbing of hot water bottles, definitely!!

- Is that a form of, of self-flagellation, you know, I mean? (laughter)

- But no, in some ways... it's a ritual, isn't it? It's a way of saying 'I want to be part of this with you'...

- a sharing

- well I didn't create that, X created that, X created the hot water bottles, it's just occasionally I would notice that it was actually rather... she preferred to be lying down in bed rather than be pouring water into two hot water bottles. Sure, I would feel I was doing something useful by doing it for her.

- In some ways it's helpful, if someone's complaining

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- In some ways it's helpful, if someone's complaining

of something, if there is a task to perform... If there isn't, I think you feel rather useless.

- I didn't feel bad or guilty... I didn't feel compensating... just that there was a need I could respond to.

- It's more the problem that you can't identify with it in the same way as if someone's got a cold, or the flu, or had a tooth out, or whatever it is, then you know, what they're talking about

- a real mystery thing to it...

- ... but it has got a mystery thing to it, because you can't possibly experience..." (pp 20/21)

One man in the group had recently undergone circumcision, and a speech he makes again reflects this ambiguous attitude:

"This is wonderful. This is the first time in my life I've ever been able to turn to women and say 'you don't know what it feels like!' (laughter) I mean the number of times that I've had something like this guilt laid on me about sort of having babies, menstruating, being the...

- You've got a men's problem at last!

- () ... I'm actually for the first time in my life able to turn to women and say 'you don't know what it feels like' and you know it's true, it's wonderful. I've got some self-respect back...

(laughter) " (p.22)

Along with resentment, as I have already suggested, some

men seem to use the women's pain in a ritual of togetherness. Thus they seek to reinforce the connection between them by entering into the experience with her, in a way analogous to the practice of couvade (cf Douglas 1975). So her pain is made acceptable by relating it to himself in an intense way.

The feelings these men are discussing, then, in part produce and in part are produced by the larger context of how a male-dominated culture deals with menstrual pain.

10.3 NEW QUESTIONS

I have set out in this chapter some of the elements of men's view of menstrual pain. The basis from which men's attitudes seem to develop appears to be a refusal to accept women's description of their experiences. Women stand accused of inventing the pain so as to gain some advantage in their dealings with men. Medical theories further elaborate this denial with notions about psychosomatic pain, and with a whole range of theories which attempt to restrict the description of 'true' dysmenorrhoea to some limited section of the menstruating female population.

The logic of the male culture, that it shouldn't happen, therefore it doesn't happen is very pervasive. To summarize the highly political and highly ambiguous way in which menstrual pain is understood in our culture, let us recall

the reply given by one 15 year old boy to Prendergast et al's questionnaire (1982), when asked whether he thought menstruation had any effect upon women's lives:

> "It doesn't necessarily make any difference, it's all part of molly-coddling girls. They are equal now."

My own experience of contradictions around the subject of menstrual pain was one of the problems which led me to want to study the sociology of menstruation. My investigations of men's attitudes clarified for me why I felt such a weight of oppression in relation to this specific subject. It was still not easy, however, for me to work out a satisfactory way of understanding my own experiences for myself.

Many questions are raised in a new way if we wish to reconsider these androcentric beliefs. How widespread is menstrual pain? Is it confined to certain types of women? Is it a modern phenomenon, or a feature of certain kinds of society?

To investigate these questions fully would be beyond the scope of this thesis, but I did find evidence (eg Snowden and Christian 1983; Consensus Research Pty, 1978; Wood 1983) to convince me that menstrual pain is very widespread among menstruating women, and that it is not confined to young childless women. Nor does it appear to exist only in Western industrialized nations. Historical evidence is not plentiful. Samuel Pepys discusses his wife's pains in his

diaries, from 1661 to 1669, with considerable sympathy. Medical sources from the sixteenth century and later (Eccles 1982; Crawford 1981; Smith 1976; Holland 1882) mention menstrual pain, but this information remains scattered and inadequate. Menstrual pain entered into politics in the nineteenth century, when it became an issue in relation to the education of women (Showalter and Showalter 1972; Mosher 1923).

To accept that it can be so that menstrual pain really does exist as it seems to, requires one to rethink the conventional medical view of pain, that it signals some disorder, some danger to the body. It may perhaps be only within this modern mind-set, where we expect our lives to be free of pain, that menstrual pain appears as in any way anomalous. The notion of psychosomatic pain seems to be a peculiarly twentieth century way of dealing with the existence of such an inconvenient phenomenon. I want, finally, to look more closely at this set of ideas about psychosomatic pain, because I think that the material on menstrual pain specifically raises important broader questions about attitudes towards female pain.

10.4 WOMEN, MEN AND PSYCHOSOMATIC PAIN

The notion that some kinds of disorders are psychogenic is

very much part of the mechanical medical model - not a departure from it. It is something quite other than a recognition that all physical problems have a mental element - that the mind and the body are not separate entities.

The concept of psychosomatic pain seems to have developed during this century as a consequence of the failure of the medical model to account for all forms of disease. Doctors use it to stop the gaps in their knowledge - while claiming that their recognition of this sort of illness just shows how sensitive and subtle their approach is.

As I read generally about how notions of psychosomatics arose (importantly influenced by psychoanalysis), it gradually became clear that women and 'female troubles' were from the start one of the main problems that doctors concerned with psychosomatics aimed to deal with. Merskey and Spear's book Pain, Psychological and Psychiatric Aspects (1967) is at once a history and an advocacy of the psychological approach to pain. They write that in the early days of its development: "For a medical view that pain might be psychological in origin it seems that one must go to physicians and surgeons" (p.6). Psychiatrists were not interested, apparently, though their ideas were borrowed.

The first concept they identify as the seed of the idea of psychosomatic pain is that of hysteria. Bart and Scully

(1979) have written an interesting historical account of the politics of hysteria. They write that:

> "while hysteria shows remarkable instability over time and lacks an objective or even uniform clinical picture... certain notable consistencies do emerge. Throughout the history of the concept... it is almost exclusively seen as a female problem."

The great majority of cases cited as evidence throughout Merskey and Spear's book relate to female patients - though their complaints are not necessarily specifically female ones. Starting as they mean to go on, Merskey and Spear approvingly quote "a famous surgeon", Brodie, writing in 1837, asserting that he "estimated that in 'upper-class' women, four fifths of joint-pains were hysterical" (p.7).

Evidently the 'cases' which worried the doctors, then as now, which set them thinking about psychological causes for illness, were most freqently women. This can be understood as the result of a failure of sympathy from men to women - men basically doubted the reality of what women said was happening to them.

I would see this as part of the process of oppression. It is interesting that doctors also hold a belief that men of the manual working class "use" pain (Weisenberg 1977; Spear 1967 quoted in Merskey and Spear). Spear identifies a group of men of "social class 5" who complain of lower back pain as "routine-minded, obsessional types"

(and see also Sternbeck et al 1973). In a section titled "personality attributes",Weisenberg says that using pain is a "labouring class" attribute. The contrast between this description of back pain patients and the popular image of the coronary patient is striking. I would see this as an analogous failure of sympathy: upper- and middle-class doctors labelling the problems of working-class men psychological in the same way that they do those of women. In both cases the class interests of the doctors are closer to those who benefit from the labour of their patients than they are to the patients themselves. If they cannot be swiftly fixed up, their pain must be denied and disregarded - it is seen as a potential 'excuse'.

Around the turn of the century, Merskey and Spear identify another influence upon medicine - that of the sexologists. Just as evolutionary theories were promoting the idea that pain is a useful tool for survival, discussions began to develop about sadism and masochism. Writers like Kraft-Ebbing and Havelock Ellis drew attention to the existence of sexual sadism and masochism and, following their usual methods of thought, held them to be normal and natural. That women enjoy pain was for the first time presented as scientific fact. Ellis argued (1898), in "Love and Pain", that pain was essential to women's sexual pleasure. Freud agreed (1905).

This development justifies and carries to its conclusion men's tendency not to see women's pain as real. Women's

psyches are presented as 'naturally' entirely different from men's, and conveniently designed to enjoy whatever abuse men want to subject them to. Merskey and Spear themselves regard masochism in women as normal and desirable:

> "If, too, it is the case as Charles Kingsley puts it that 'Men must work whilst women must weep' then the value to women of some degree of all four types of masochism can be affirmed on biological, psychological and social grounds." (p.123)

Merskey and Spear cite a great number of articles to support their thesis - mainly they are simply statements by doctors that they believe this or that group of patients with this or that problem to be suffering from some psychiatric problem. The authors themselves have caried out some research which at least attempts to investigate these opinions in a systematic way. But the way they use dysmenorrhoea demonstrates how deeply prejudiced they are in their approach. They take it entirely for granted that dysmenorrhoea is a psychological problem, and try to use it as a kind of measure of a woman's tendency towards psychological pain generally.

But when they actually carry out comparisons between groups of women with other kinds of pain and control groups, they are obliged to report: "A surprising finding, by both Spear and Merskey was that dysmenorrhoea was not reported significantly more often in the index groups with pain" (p. 82). Not to worry! They conclude that "if the evidence

on dysmenorrhoea was negative in these studies it nevertheless seems likely that there is a relationship between it and other types of psychological symptom" (p.84). And again, discussing the notion of the"pain-prone" person, "It could be argued that in women dysmenorrhoea would occur more commonly in those who were pain-prone" (p.175). They do not seem to even consider allowing their experimental findings to interfere with their theories.

Merskey and Spear's book cannot, of course, be taken to represent the whole of the literature on psychosomatic pain, but their account of the history of the idea is astounding in its unselfconscious assumption that women are somehow naturally especially subject to this kind of suffering.

Joan Busfield (1983) has argued in relation to the categories of psychiatric illness that it is not so much the case simply that women and men suffer to different degrees from different categories of mental illness, as that the categories themselves are constructed with reference to the different life experiences of women and men. In a similar way, the category 'psychosomatic pain' contains within it a connection to the gender division. This implicit reference to notions of women's proneness to imaginary complaints also carries with it a further reference to women's sexuality: a vague suggestion that women are not entirely averse to pain, that women may not

only 'use' pain, but also even enjoy pain in certain ways.

This ideology encourages men to regard women as 'other', not to extend to them the fullest human sympathy. Women are not given the respect involved in an acceptance that a person gives a true account of their physical sensations.

The old christian way of thinking allowed men to see women as fulfilling different functions from themselves within god's scheme and as therefore subject to different conditions of life. Modern ideas about women's tendency to suffer from psychosomatic pain carry with them reference to female masochism as well as to female weakness. Combined with an etiquette which cautions women against drawing attention to their own pain, especially to pains relating to the 'female parts', they successfully ensure that most women will opt to suffer in silence rather than to risk the discredit attached to complaining of menstrual pain.

CHAPTER 11

MOOD CHANGE AND THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE: THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'PREMENSTRUAL TENSION'

This chapter and the next one, on the recent campaign to ban Value Added Tax on sanitary wear, are united by a common underlying theme. How do issues related to menstruation move out of the private sphere and into the public eye? What are the sexual politics surrounding public talk about such matters? There is a contrast between the two, for while the women involved in the campaign have found it extremely difficult to obtain press coverage for their cause, premenstrual tension has definitely 'caught on' as a subject for features in newspapers, both on 'women's' pages and in the news pages. But my study is not of the media: what I will concentrate on here relates to the micro-level of sexual politics which reflects and is reflected by the same politics at the societal level.

As we have seen, Esther Merves' survey found that US women said that mood change was one of the most likely foci for interactions between women and men in relation to menstruation.

I have written elsewhere (1983; 1985) more generally about the development of what I see as a new medical ideology of 'premenstrual tension' as a treatable disease. I have

argued that premenstrual tension cannot be seen as a naturally occurring disease entity only recently 'discovered' by scientists.

It is undoubtedly true that the menstrual cycle produces a whole range of little-understood effects, physical and mental, which may vary greatly in their impact from one woman to another and from one cycle, or time of life, to another within an individual. But using a disease model isolates the premenstrual phase from the rest of the cycle, concentrates on negative effects rather than positive ones, and attempts to construct an illness out of this picture of a subtle continuum of change (cf Parlee 1973).

Women are encouraged to see themselves as 'not themselves' during the premenstrual time, to bracket out the feelings and experiences they have during that time and to attribute them to the menstrual cycle rather than to other factors (Koeske and Koeske 1975; Koeske 1980).

While women certainly want the effects of the menstrual cycle to be acknowledged, want it to be possible to speak about them, it is necessary to ask in whose interest this new discourse about 'PMT' operates. Doctors like Katharina Dalton, who are active in promoting the notion of PMT as an illness, will argue that they are acting to relieve women's sufferings - but are they? Barker-Benfield (1975) reports how in nineteenth century America Dr. W.P. Menton justified the "castration" (removal of the ovaries) of "demented"

women in terms of "their right to relief from bodily suffering". Like the PMT doctors of the present day, the early surgeons who carried out such operations on women assumed the existence of what Barker-Benfield aptly calls a "modest self", the self which these diseases of femininity are held to suppress. This argument can be used to justify any form of treatment, any analysis of 'women's problems'.

It is notable that interest in premenstrual tension should emerge in the years following the development of a powerful and energetic women's liberation movement. It can in part be seen as an alternative explanation for women's unhappiness - an explanation which places the cause of women's problems within our own bodies instead of outside, in social power relations.

'Premenstrual tension' is very much an area of change, a focus of debate within the culture at present - no simple description of its meaning can be found. This chapter will look at the ways in which 'premenstrual tension' appears in some men's lives, how and where men and women may speak of it, and at the significance of medical ideology in this area.

11.1 MALE VIEWS OF MENSTRUAL CYCLE MOOD CHANGE

There was a great deal of publicity around PMT in Britain in late 1981, when two cases reached the courts within a

couple of days of each other in which women offered pleas of diminished responsibility due to PMT as a defence against murder charges (Hey 1985). A Guardian headline read: "Killing puts an end to the PMT taboo", and several other newspaper articles followed the same line of thought. But does public talk about PMT mean the end of the 'taboo' on talk about menstruation? We must attend to who may say what to whom if we are to observe whether or not the etiquette has changed in any profound ways.

So what data could I gather from my interviews with men about individual men's attitudes to premenstrual tension? One striking finding is a negative one: no man reported any conversation initiated by a woman with a man in a public setting in which she referred to her own mood changes.

Men, however, do seem to feel free to speak about menstrual cycle-related mood change in public settings, to other men and to certain women. Particularly at work, men may put bad temper in a woman down to menstruation. Note that what the men refer to in this context is the notion that women are bad tempered or moody during menstruation, not before it.

> "...Especially when I was working a factory, one of the supervisors was a woman and once she got really annoyed over something that was stupid, and that was when I first... I was only 17 when I was working there, and I remember the bloke said 'oh it's just the monthlies, you know, she'll get over it'... 'don't

worry about it'" (K 3)

"SL: and would the women ever have said if they had periods, or anything about it (in the place you worked)?

H: No, but it usually became evident ... Because of, er well, whether it was actually evident or whether it was imagined that it was, like they were in a bad mood and I think you imagined that it was because it was their period. Because mainly in my job it tended to be women that did it. I was always in a minority, either on my own or with one or two others. And so if there were a lot of women there'd obviously be someone who was in a bad mood because they were menstruating, at least that's what we put it down to.

SL: Is that all of you, or you men put it down to, do you think? I mean, what would the women say to each other?

H: No, I mean it was not discussed with the women. Um, maybe sometimes we'd overhear women saying 'oh, she's in a bad mood, but it's that time of the month' so they'd sort of forgive her... But I think it was mainly to do with the men. And even, maybe because I'd worked with other men and we'd talked around that, you know, 'oh, she's in a bad mood, she's bloody menstruating again' (laughs) you know, when I worked on my own with women I still had that mentality, 'jesus christ who's menstruating again' (laughs) (H 6)

It was remarkable to me that while the men had among them only heard menstrual pain mentioned as a reason for being off work a very few times, these ideas about mood change seemed quite widespread. One man says that he might ask a woman about it directly:

> "... when I come to think of it, when I worked in (an office) where you could get on with people quite well, I suppose that we would refer to it there actually. If people were feeling quite fed up, especially people I knew a little bit, then I would say, I might well say, 'oh, is it the time of the month?' And they'd usually say yes. Sometimes no, but... But not where I've been working the last three years, it's just not...you just wouldn't bring it up... " (group p.18)

I do not know how much this sort of thing goes on in this country. In Esther Merves'(1983) study when asked if anyone ever spoke to them about menstruation, 52% said that at least once they'd been asked if they were menstruating by someone who didn't know. Among the women under 34, the figure is more like 75%. They said that what they would be asked was "Are you on the rag?" and that they would be asked this if they were "depressed for no apparent reason" or "bitchy". Often the women said that they felt insulted by this, though some of them also said that it might be asked jokingly.

In some of my interviews, I found that when I asked about period pain, I was answered about PMT:

> "SL: ... were you aware then that women had pain with

periods, or any of those... how it affected them?
A: no, no, I wasn't, no I don't think I actually became aware that it was painful, that there were physical side-effects, until I was in my early twenties, actually. I think I thought that there were psychological side-effects, that there was a sort of, ah, vague depressions and irritability, and things, but I worked that out more or less from my experience of it rather than being told about it." (A 4)

"SL: so did any of the women you've known have period pains?
K: It's difficult. Most of the women I've known would tend to keep very quiet, I mean they don't make it obvious if they're having a period, they don't say, 'oh forgive me, it's the time of the month' or something. It's usually, say if they have a fit of pique or something, one of their friends would say (whispers) 'it's that time of the month, you know'. That's sort of thing that happens more, that's when you find out about it."
"... the first proper girlfriend I had, she used to say something, 'such and such time of the month'. And when she'd say that I was always really curious, and I used to ask her about things. That's when things like premenstrual tension used to become more obvious because I used to try and notice when it was happening and notice the difference between before and after, and things like that...

SL: do you think you could, at the time?

K: with that particular girl, no. Not at all, I couldn't tell at all." (K 3,2)

It is notable that what most of the men talk about is 'that time of the month' or something of the kind, not 'PMT'. But the content of their ideas fits in well with the image put over by the PMT doctors. In practice, for the man in the office who wants a put-down for a woman who's just spoken to him without a sweet smile, it doesn't matter whether he's accusing her of being on her period or just before. He can make a vague reference to 'the monthlies' in the secure belief that a woman can be belittled by calling attention to this aspect of her femaleness.

This sliding between male beliefs about the mental effects of menstruation itself and the notion of 'premenstrual tension' is noted, in a slightly confused way, in the men's group discussion. Why is cyclic mood change always linked to menstruation?

"- when you speak of <u>pre</u> menstrual tension, I mean, we're talking about several days before a period comes on?

- the week before

- which is crazy really, to talk about something that's happening now in terms of something that's about to happen... I mean isn't it more that... I mean you might just as well say that it's a few days, a

week, after the sort of most pregnant part of the cycle.

- what, ovulation?

- yeah

- post-ovulation?

- it's to do with the hormonal changes, basically

- the hormonal changes which are going to lead to evacuation rather than...

- it would probably be after ovulation, bound to be after ovulation, but no it is the hormonal changes.

- Premenstrual tension, it's just a funny way of putting it really

- easier than post ovulation tension..." (group p 16)

From my interviews I had the impression that many men had held for a long time that periods made a women a bit odd, cross, unpredictable, and that PMT was to them just a new name for something they knew about all along.

"Like I never really considered premenstrual tension or something like that, until I was 18 or 19, until I went to university. Although at home, I suppose, my mother was saying, like when my sister would cry, she would say 'It's the wrong time of the month', for my sister, and that sort of got my mind associating crying with periods.

SL: Although she may have meant that she was having her period mayn't she?

G: yeah... just really sort of... it's got a stigma attached to it I suppose, in families. Well it was in

our family. Families are often like that." (G 2)

11.1.1 Arguments

For most of the men I interviewed who had much to say about PMT, it was in relation to their intimate, sexual relationships with women that they felt it to be important to them. A number of them associated it with arguments: some attributed difficulties in their relationships to it:

"D:... I mean only one relationship which has actually involved kind of actually really talking about it (menstruation), and that was actually talking about it quite a lot at times...

SL: was that because it was a problem for her, or between you?

D: Not because it was a problem really, just because, um, you know, if she was feeling really kind of on edge, I mean quite often it would actually sort of be about having an argument, and then, maybe couple of days later her saying, you know, explaining why, why she'd been so,... I mean I still can't actually begin to understand what happens when women are having a period, in terms of, you know, premenstrual tension or whatever, or the rest of it... But yeah, um, I have spoken about it quite a lot." (D 3)

"L:... Well she gets the tension... like you can always tell when she's got them because she gets really uptight, and anything you say is just wrong, and she snaps... whether it's right or wrong, if she's

said, beforehand, such and such is right, you can try saying that, even, she just ignores it, it's wrong. It's just illogical.

SL: And does she say that's PMT?

L: Yes. Well I didn't realise to start with, but after she said, it was fairly obvious... So you could see when she's coming up to it... and you've just got to adjust to it... stuff like that... It can be a bit difficult to cope with when one time she's being bad tempered, and she's in a really bad mood, and it's putting you in a bad mood, makes her difficult to get on with,but when you realise it is because of that, then you've got to adjust to it, otherwise, just, nothing will work." (L 2/3)

"G:... like I know that X gets really uptight, can get really in a bad state, like the other day, we just had a really bad argument, and like she was really shouting at me and crying and stuff. And I suppose I didn't think about it then, but like that was the right time for her to be feeling that, feeling premenstrual tension. I suppose she was attacking me, and... oh, I don't know." (G 3)

"SL: ... Do you remember talking about it?

M: Yes. I don't think there was a vast amount of discussion, not initially anyway, about menstruation as such, but about the effects of menstruation...

SL: about the sex thing, or the pain?

M: Oh yes both - yes that's right. The first main

relationship I had () the woman I was with had quite severe problems with her menstrual cycle in fact when she had a period, she was completely, she couldn't do things,she'd literally drop things, she'd be a lunatic driving the car for about 2 or 3 days, she wouldn't go near driving the car in that time.() So it really was brought home to me fairly forcibly - from not experiencing, for quite some time, to experiencing that. And in fact it became quite a major feature of our relationship, in a sense, that it was something, because of the way it affected her, the way it changed her, it became fantastically... bad tempered... I don't know whether that's related to other things, I don't know, but it, certainly she felt it was related to that, and that was how I experienced it particularly, so before.()

SL: Did you find that upsetting?

M: Yes I found it very difficult to take, because I wasn't used to that kind of response () 'It's down to this, I'm always like this', you know, and I think it's very difficult to get used to - I'm not sure I ever entirely got used to it, felt easy about it. It was difficult, but far more difficult for her than for me, see what I mean? (M 3/4)

"... I don't remember being resentful about her being menstrual, as such. Far more the effects of it that concerned me. In that sense,the fact that she was very difficult to be with for a couple of days, or the fact

> that... certain things she couldn't do... it was just. .. you couldn't look around for a minute, otherwise there'd be something broken on the floor, or something... It must have been a really awful experience for her - but I mean that was the sort of pressure. And I certainly did get to the point of dreading it for that reason,... " (M 4)

He contrasts this with his present relationship:

> "... it's the opposite way round, in a sense... menstruation, the period and everything, didn't seem to exist - it was totally the opposite, it made absolutely no difference and was tremendously played down. It didn't make any difference to her character or her behaviour or anything at all. And that was a tremendous relief, I must say that. It was really nice! (laughs) You know, it's a bit heartless to say that, because it's obviously worse or better from the woman's experience in it, but I have to say... it's much easier to live with. I think that made an important difference in terms of the relationship as a whole, in contrast, if you're right to view it in those terms..." (M 5)

Other men, too, remarked on how different women's menstrual cycles affected them differently, though no others were so emphatic.

But not all the men regarded cyclic mood change as entirely a negative disruption; the image which is always put over in the 'PMT' literature:

"J: I started having a very close relationship with a woman when I was 19, and then I first got to know about it on a personal level, from her personal experiences. She used to get very bad premenstrual tension, and... she was brought up as a Protestant (in Ireland), and she didn't seem to have the same taboos about it..."

"... It was very obvious to me after a while, once she'd explained to me what it was, because I never knew about premenstrual tension before I went out with her. She explained to me exactly how she felt... the way she explained it to me was that she just got very, she was very very sensitive, and it was obvious, she could get very very angry sometimes, but sometimes she could be very soft, she was just very sensitive... (J 2-4)

"C:... So I kind of decided to get interested and get involved because it's something that, well we'll understand each other better if I understand more about what goes on, how she feels, you know, during that regular cycle. So I think there's been a quite recent and quite specific change, which means that we're both more aware, and have in a way done that from choice, and partly also from external events forcing it on us.

SL: So the book (<u>The Wise Wound</u>) helped you to think about it?

C: Yes, and I'm sure, her attitude has definitely

shifted to being much more aware of how mood and other aspects of her body and her feelings change in that period, and that, things that she'd never noticed before but must have been there, about how her body feels different, and how she feels, and I think she's infinitely more comfortable with the sitation, and in some ways I think so am I, just simply knowing and understanding a bit more, and being a bit more sensitive, to the process, if you like. And realising that it isn't just a nuisance, and that there might actually be rather good things, in terms of insights or particular activities which it's really appropriate to do, as well as some things that it's definitely appropriate not to do, during that particular 2 or 3, 4, 5 day period, and, you know, it can only help both of us to be aware of that and to see what one can do with it, how best to respond to it, and so I think we've been thinking somewhat about that, and beginning to talk..." (C 4)

Although mention of PMT came up most in relation to men's intimate relationships, it did occur in other contexts as well. Several men mentioned in passing that they might on occasion be aware of mood changes in women friends of theirs, though only one had had women friends who would themselves tell him about it:

"B:... as we became much closer friends, and X said oh,if she's maybe snapped, or something, she'd say 'sorry, I'm on this week', or something, and that was

just it, and left it at that... that wasn't until much later on..."

"SL: Have you any other friendships with women where you've been aware of them having periods?

B: Yes. I don't know if you know Y and Z? I got to know them in my first year (at university)... and at the time they were writing the Women and Health leaflet for the university, and I remember, like, Y, talking about it, and it was always like, you know, 'I'm on this week', or 'I'm due on Friday' or whatever, and you know, 'I'm a bit tensed up' and things. And I remember them telling me things they were writing for the Women and Health group, like decrease the amount of salt in your diet the week before your period, to increase the potassium level... if it's just before or during, I can't remember now... she used to eat a lot of bananas at that time..." (B 3/4)

Only one man spoke about being aware of mood changes in relation to his mother's menstrual cycle:

"E:... as I began to become aware, of her cycles, and my own cycles I suppose, to develop a feel of a rhythm I began to feel that there were particular times of the month and year when I'd be most, either alienated from her, or close to her, when we'd both be able to communicate more easily. Initially I just thought they were good times and bad times, but after a few years I began to notice rhythms... starting to form. And in

retrospect, it wasn't till I saw things in retrospect that I really began to notice what had been going on. I didn't sort of feel, until I was about 15 or 16, any sort of solid rhythm that I could almost say, my mother's got a period at the moment because of the way she's, she is, she's nervous and she's dropping a lot of things, and my father's giving her stick all the time for sort of doing things wrong..." (E 1)

As I have said, several of the men I interviewed had never thought about menstruation in relation to their mothers at all: this man's intense involvement with his mother, and his active thought about reasons for her emotional states seem quite unusual. It is unclear what evidence he had for connecting the behaviours he could observe with the menstrual cycle.

11.1.2 Self-Criticism

Some of the men I have quoted seem to use the notion of PMT quite unproblematically, but a few of them had a critical consciousness, that behaviours could be wrongly attributed to it:

"... what I've found is, specially, well, only with girls is, they're irritable, you immediately think, 'oh PMTs, can make allowances, ' that sort of thing, ... Even when it's not, I mean, it doesn't matter, it could be anything could be irritating them, you tend to think 'PMTs, make allowances for that sort of thing'" (K 5)

"... well the problem with X was, they were so irregular, then it was very difficult to gauge when it was, so we never got into a situation where we could immediately say 'ah, it's that time of the month', whereas I've known other women who more or less could tell the time they were due on the basis of how they start feeling... what used to happen, almost invariably was that we'd have a pretty tense times, and maybe arguments or what have you, and then she'd have a period, and we'd both say 'aren't we stupid' you know... Now to some extent, I think we may even have used, I don't know to what extent, we sometimes used that as an excuse,as we were having rows fairly regularly, and things could have been quite tense regardless of that, but certainly it was a regular enough pattern, repeated, for us to say quite clearly that there was a certain tension and depression associated with that time of the month. She used to be really quite down, and when she started her psychological condition would improve, regardless..." (N 4/5)

A discussion in the men's group brings out some of the issues more, as one man tries to challenge another about an attitude he finds patronising:

"-... I'm very aware that X gets extremely clumsy (laughs) and I get very annoyed (laughter) in about the week before her period. And we both recognise it now as a phenomenon, that she drops plates, crashes

cars (laughter)... etc, etc, do you know what I mean? And it's just a kind of syndrome that we now both recognise. I don't know that she recognised it until recently, but we both laugh about it now, and when you're aware of that it is, it's kind of actually ... (laughs) I mean when she was like that before I used to go spare (laughter), I used to be sort of ridiculously controlling, and I used to get very angry with her, and now I can usually realise that... and then I try to make her not do anything... 'look just sit down, and I'll do everything'...

- (interrupts) 'Does she take sugar?' * It's very close to sort of mistreating a woman to take that position I think (laughs)

- Certainly is

- I'm very, incredibly cautious of actually having that sort of reductionist theory of explaining phenomena...

(laughter)

... I'll explain that: Whenever a baby starts crying, right, I've found a lot of parents have this sort of reductionist theory that, reduce the causes to - it's hungry or it's tired. Right? It's can't possibly but be because the child is experiencing something in its environment that is nasty or unpleasant at that point in time. It's reduced to an explanation that covers

---

* reference to the title of a radio programme for and about people with disabilities.

everything. And I'm worried that the same sort of reductionism can occur when talking about the things that happen around the time when a woman's about to start menstruating... It's easy and I wonder if it's dangerous to start interpreting everything that happens as though it's part of, thereby dismissing the woman's actual identity

- oh, sure

- Like if you have an argument before, to reduce that argument to a 'all right dear it's because of...' ... is awful... and I'm very conscious that that is potentially a very very bad thing to do... (laughter)

- Obviously premenstrual tension has varying effects, and it can be an extremely disruptive experience for the woman

- clumsiness (laughter)

- Well that's not as bad as saying 'I won't take any notice of what you say when you're in this condition, because you're somehow not up to scratch'

- yes yes

- 'We'll talk about it after your period'..."

(group pp16/17)

So we can see that there is a range of ways in which the men in my sample may mobilise ideas about cyclic mood change in their relations with women - and also a range of levels of sophisticiation in their self-consciousness about this. How does this everyday use of ideas relate to the medical discourse on the subject? I tried to ask questions

about the causes of premenstrual tension, but rarely obtained very clear answers. Partly I think this was because I sometimes asked the question in rather unclear form, running together PMT and menstrual pain. I did this,I think, because some men reacted badly to close questioning about what they felt to be factual 'information', where they felt ignorance might be seen as discrediting. However the result was that some men answered the question as about menstrual pain, others about PMT and others not at all.

One quite full response, which seems to refer to PMT, goes as follows:

> "F: Well I think that at least in some cases, there's simple dietary deficiencies.
>
> SL: ah... what sort of thing?
>
> F: I think probably B vitamins and iron, and just generally the body's ability to adjust evenly to its hormonal secretions, at different times of the month, are impaired by deficiencies. I think there's also,... that the situation a women is in socially, her environment, probably does exaggerate and exacerbate any tensions that exist anyway, waiting for a period to come..." (F 3)

B, the man who had been involved in discussions on women's health issues with close feminist friends, gave an account which clearly separates the two questions and which contains an account of the causation of PMT:

"... well PMT, things I've picked up, I thought that it was basically due to a hormone imbalance, just before the period, it wasn't as balanced as maybe it should be... nobody's perfect, so no one's going to fit into the perfect... not every woman is 28 days, same sort of thing. And, you know, about PMT, things like, I think it was in America, was it?, that a woman was let off because she, the doctor said she had PMT when she committed some theft or hit someone or something. For period pains, I've never really known why women get period pains, though I know that a lot of women do get pains... a lot of the women I've been in contact with have had period pains... I've never really questioned why some women do, some women don't ... (B 5/6)

11.2 GYNAECOLOGISTS ON PMT

Interestingly, the 'information' about PMT in the gynaecology texts I studied was as patchy and incomplete as was the knowledge of individual men. None of them give much space to discussion of premenstrual tension: Dewhurst does not mention it at all, and Clayton and Newton only give it a short paragraph, a listing of possible treatments. Given what we have seen in relation to other menstrual problems, and the extent to which their reality is doubted, it is notable that despite a certain lack of interest, the reality of premenstrual changes seems not to be in question.

In fact for Clayton and Newton (p.19), discomfort before the period may be the only real symptom of the cycle, for it alone is accompanied by "objective evidence of metabolic changes" of a measureable kind.

Proceeding in their usual way, the doctors do try to characterize the PMT patient. Unlike women with menstrual pain, who are held to be very young, women with PMT are felt to be: over 30 (Barnes p.46); of average age 35 (Garrey p.120); 30-45 years old (Jeffcoate p.547). Garrey adds to this the notion that PMT is class-linked:

> "Marriage and childbirth do not affect PMT but there is usually a preponderance of the more articulate patients, especially professional women who must appear before the public and cannot easily stay off work." (p.120)

Jeffcoate would look to something within the woman's personality rather than to her conditions of life. He writes that "there is nearly always a fundamental constitutional, and sometimes inherited weakness which makes the individual 'fail to cope' with the ordinary day to day stresses of life".

He <u>also</u> suggests that PMT is a feature of modern conditions of life in Western "civilized" countries and is rarely encountered in women of "Eastern countries" (p.547). The popular literature on PMT (eg Lever 1980) contains

various claims of this sort, about the relation between PMT and "civilization", its existence in other cultures, and so on. Sometimes all social practices relating to menstruation are attributed to the underlying threat constituted by out-of-control premenstrual women. At other times Western women are seen as particularly subject to stress, a notion which I think is linked to the idea that Western society is particularly unnatural, and that this especially affects women's bodies. People in other cultures, "Eastern countries" in Jeffcoate's case, are seen in classic racist style as less sophisticated, less developed than Westerners.

Jeffcoate also discusses premenstrual mastalgia (breast pain before periods), something which is often described by doctors as a feature of PMT. This condition, he writes, is:

> "Mostly seen in frustrated and unhappy nulliparae (women without children) of late middle age, and a background of nervous tension is important. Cancerophobia is frequently present." (p.550)

This last statement presumably refers to the likelihood that women going to a gynaecologist with lumpy swollen painful breasts might wish for reassurance that they do not have breast cancer. Considering what a common killer this cancer is, it seems unfair and insulting to call such women phobic.

The causes of premenstrual tension are little discussed.

Jeffcoate, as we might expect, suggests that the woman is just overdoing it:

> "a reorganisation of her life or her outlook on life is often necessary... A sleep for two hours in the middle of every day is particularly helpful." (p.547)

Garrey's text offers a tabulation of four theories, which I think is worth reproducing in full for its thoroughly patronising attitude.

PRE-MENSTRUAL TENSION SYNDROME

Aetiology

There are several theories:

1. Simple fluid retention due to cyclic increase in steroid hormones. Fluid retention is certainly the commonest symptom (and about the only one that can be measured) but it is difficult to accept it as the cause of the more extravagant mood changes.
2. Endocrine changes Progesterone deficiency: oestrogen/progesterone imbalance: raised aldosterone levels during luteal phase: raised prolactin levels. None of these is constantly present (about one third of patients will show progesterone deficiency) and in many cases the endocrine profile is normal.
3. An evolutionary phenomenon PMT represents post-ovulation sexual hostility to the male, thus increasing the frequency of coitus during the fertile phase of the cycle (and increasing the chance of survival of the species).
4. Reaction of a neurotic personality to normal cyclical variations in hormone levels. Hysterical women will certainly exaggerate, but many severely neurotic women are not sufferers, and no correlation has been found between PMT and psychiatric ill-health.

(Theories 3 and 4 should not be offered to the patient during an acute attack.)

From: Garrey et al 1978

In terms of treatments recommended, talk, "a simple explanation" (Llewellyn-Jones p.74) is thought to be very helpful by half of these doctors. It is not so clear, as with the explanation which is held to cure period pain in adolescents, what exactly such talk would consist of.

Otherwise various drugs are suggested. Top of this list, recommended by four doctors each, are tranquillizers and diuretics (wich reduce fluid in the body by increasing the excretion of urine). Three doctors suggest progestogens, and one each offer phenobarbitone (a barbiturate), bromocriptine and pyridoxine (vitamin B6). These last two are among the drugs presently being promoted as specifics for PMT, along with progestogens. Only Garrey mentions them.

11.3 PMT AS ILLNESS: NOT A NEW DEPARTURE

There is a large gap between the scattered material on PMT in these texts and the picture one can gain from the work of doctors like Dalton(eg 1977) and Brush(eg 1981) and from popularising books like those of Lever (1980) and Kingston (1980). What is most obvious is that the dismissive and patronising attitude which comes across in these older texts is exactly what has driven many women to see the PMT promoters as a pro-woman force. Faced with doctors who regard a consciousness of emotional and physical changes with the menstrual cycle as a neurotic trait, women who

have such consciousness are likely to prefer an account which at least takes their experience seriously. But while they affirm the reality of cyclic change, doctors like Dalton participate in a distinctly anti-feminist rhetoric which has encouraged a public scare about the threat of unpredictable, out-of-control, violent premenstrual women.

There is often little clarity about what defines the difference between 'all women' and 'PMT sufferers'. There is also often an insistence that women should take treatment, as a duty to their husbands and children (whom they are accused of battering and otherwise abusing while premenstrual) (Dalton 1982).

There is debate at present within the British medical establishment about the correct view of PMT. While the promoters of PMT as a disease have gained a good deal of ground, their greatest influence appears to be outside of medical circles. Dalton herself recognised this in setting up the Association for the Premenstrual Syndrome in 1984, which explicitly encourages patients to pressurise doctors for progesterone treatment. One suspects that medical resistance to the new wave of thought on PMT comes from several sources: the underlying resistance to change which is found in any profession; sexist belief that it is right for women to suffer; sexist belief that women invent ailments to 'get out of things'; proper scientific skepticism about the extreme claims often made by PMT promoters; and anxiety about the long term effects of

particular new treatments suggested, especially of hormone treatments. Two editorials in the Lancet in recent years (1981 and 1983) expressed reasoned doubts about the claims of Dalton and others.

But since these ideas are only recently gaining in influence, it is not yet clear how important they may become. That struggle is currently taking place at many levels, in public and in private, between 'lay' women and men, doctors and patients, as well as among doctors. One can see from the rather incoherent and disparate ideas brought up by the men in my sample, how complex these issues are. Different ways of looking at menstrual cycle mood change bring with them different advantages and disadvantages for men individually and as a group, just as they do for women.

While the men I interviewed had absorbed only a small amount of the newer medical ideas about premenstrual tension, many of them held the same general view of women and mood changes as doctors like Katharina Dalton. A number of them had a long standing belief that at the 'time of the month' (possibly meaning during the bleeding), women are bad-tempered and unreliable. Many of them readily offered accounts of occasions when they had had arguments with women they were close to, which they had attributed to some hormonal influence upon the woman. However others demonstrated an awareness that notions like 'premenstrual tension' are very flexible, and that there is a danger of

attributing behaviours to hormones which are not in fact caused in this way. The individual men in my sample, and the discussions in the men's group, more explicitly reflect the larger debate which is taking place at the larger, societal level.

In contrast to the campaign against VAT on sanitary wear, those involved in promoting the idea of PMT as a disease have gained very wide publicity. Valerie Hey (1985) discussed the press coverage of the trial of Christine English in 1981 - a case which reached the front pages of several daily papers. She identifies two themes within the discourse: "An Excuse for Anything" (which she draws in the particular from the wife of the man Ms English killed) and "not responsible for herself" (the defense barrister's argument).

These two themes can also be identified in male culture's version of menstruation generally - that women 'use it as an excuse' (a view discussed in Chapter 6) and that it is overwhelmingly important to women's lives, that it sums up the extent to which women are more biological beings than men (Birke and Best 1980). These two in this case operate in contradiction to each other - but their simultaneous presence accounts for the fascination the subject appears to hold for the press. Within the supposedly scientific discourse on PMT, men see the potentiality for proof to emerge of the truth of the view of women which is enshrined

in male culture.

At the same time, women are demanding to be allowed to speak about menstruation, about their bodies: PMT provides a kind of trade-off. 'Yes let's talk about how your menstrual cycle affects you, but it'll be your own fault if it only turns out to discredit you further'. Women's self-definition is preempted by the imposition of medical categories upon their experience.

CHAPTER 12

A CAMPAIGN TO BAN TAX ON SANITARY WEAR: MEN RESIST CHANGE

This chapter explores another side of the question of how issues relating to menstruation enter the public sphere, and how that publicity affects women as a group: in this case we consider the way in which such an issue can be kept out of the public eye. This specific case study illustrates some of the ways in which the sexual politics around menstruation are lived out between women and men.

The purpose of this chapter is to show how men, particularly men in public life, have reacted to the campaign to ban Value Added Tax (VAT) on sanitary wear. In order to give a context to the men's statements, I will give a narrative description of the development of the campaign. This method will also usefully remind us that the source of this data is Denise Flowers' account of her experience and not the men themselves, or any 'neutral' person.

More data on this campaign is presented in the Appendix - that part which emphasizes the woman's point of view. It contains material from letters which women wrote to the campaign, and a discussion of the politics of the campaign generally.

When I began my research I had already known for some years that a campaign against VAT on sanitary wear existed - but it was not until after a year or more's work that it occurred to me that these campaigners might be good informants for me. I had found that male slang often centres on sanitary towels, and that men seem to react differently to being made aware of menstruation depending upon whether it occurs in the home, in private, or in public life.

Two things reminded me about the campaign. Two of the men I interviewed mentioned it, and my memory was jogged further when a report appeared in Spare Rib (Jan 1983, issue 126) that the campaign had delivered their petition to the Prime Minister, carrying 110,000 signatures. I realised then that these women, in working for this particular demand, were putting themselves in a unique position. They would be trying to make public one of the aspects of menstruation that men least want to hear about. So I felt that they would be in an excellent position to tell me a good deal about how men feel about menstruation.

Before I describe what I found out from the campaigners, I think it may be useful to say a little more about what I expected before I contacted them. I expected to find a small group with little energy, complaining about getting little support from other women. I also expected them to be politically naive, or at least politically liberal - and I was very afraid that they would be a bit mad, obsessed with

"their" issue.

As it turns out I was wrong on every count! (see the Appendix for details). I describe my expectations because I think it reveals something about what we are all up against that even I, who was herself already devoted fulltime to thinking about periods, could be so prejudiced.

The first thing I had to adjust to was that there was no group, such as I had expected, and such as is usual with feminist campaigns. One woman is very much the pivotal force in the campaign, though she gets help from her friends (especially Catherine Smith and Sue Peters) and coordinates the activities of women all over the country. She is Denise Flowers, a working-class white woman in her early thirties, married with two daughters. Most of my data comes from an extended interview with her, which I taped. I also met Sue Peters and Denise's husband, Paul, that day, and Denise and I have corresponded a good deal since then.

12.1 HOW IT BEGAN

The story of Denise Flowers' involvement with this issue begins with her learning at her Workers' Educational Association Women's Studies class that sanitary wear was taxed at 15%. She had been politically active in the local area before this on tenants rights, but not on women's

issues. She was angered and began making protests on her own behalf - she wrote to Woman's 'Soapbox' column, in 1981, and the letter was published, then she spoke on Robbie Vincent's phone-in programme on Radio London. Gaining some encouragment from this, she wrote to her MP in protest - the first step in conventional pressure-group political action. He sent her a copy of a letter he had written to someone else:

> "saying, 'I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do', and I got a bit annoyed, because he's insipid anyway as an MP, and it was just that attitude, and I thought, well if he's written to someone else, there's got to be more people than just me and some others. So I wrote to the person mentioned in his photocopied letter, and I said to her, 'how do you feel about doing something about it?' And she said 'well I don't think you can do anything about it, you know, it's pointless, you're not going to get anywhere, and if you are going to try, you ought to go for the Trade Unions'. And I said 'For the moment I want to keep politics completely out of it, and I want to try for women...' So I started writing letters, and I wrote to the newspapers, the radio, started with MPs..."

She started a petition, almost by accident. She wrote a letter to Spare Rib asking for their help in starting a campaign against this tax, and a little while later an item appeared in the magazine saying that she had started a petition, and suggesting women should write to her for

issues. She was angered and began making protests on her own behalf - she wrote to Woman's 'Soapbox' column, in 1981, and the letter was published, then she spoke on Robbie Vincent's phone-in programme on Radio London. Gaining some encouragment from this, she wrote to her MP in protest - the first step in conventional pressure-group political action. He sent her a copy of a letter he had written to someone else:

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copies.

Denise rose to the occasion, and after consulting a woman in 'Women in Media', wrote out a petition, in black felt tip pen, as she was advised, and began to photocopy it and distribute copies. The petition read as follows:

> "We the undersigned demand the removal of VAT on sanitary wear. Menstruation is a natural event and taxing already overpriced items is insulting to all women."

Denise says now:

> "I didn't want to set out to shock anyone anyway... in fact that was something that had never crossed my mind anyway, that it might shock people. I never thought about it. I didn't know, I didn't think 'Blimey this is going to get an awful lot of ...' Because if I'd thought that it was going to attract a lot of attention to me personally, I wouldn't have done it... I thought most people just accepted it as part of that ..."

One of the letters Denise wrote was to "Woman's Hour" and this is where the campaign began to gain momentum. Denise describes the course of events:

> "They rang up one day and said 'look we're going to broadcast the letter this afternoon, or tomorrow', and that was the 6th January (1982) () So after that broadcast, which was fairly late in the afternoon, it came on about half past two, I had about 14 letters,

first thing the next day and I thought 'god, you know, that's a bit quick!, people must have sat down then and there'. And the day after that I had over a hundred, and the day after that I had 150, and I thought, 'god I can't cope with this, you know, what am I going to do?', so I quickly phoned this friend who does the printing, and said 'print some more!' So she printed some more, and most people were sending stamped addressed envelopes, but then a great mass weren't. Then I was contacted by people who'd heard it on the radio, a stringer from "Thames at Six" rang, but when it came to the day of delivery, they denied that they'd ever made a promise, whereas in actually fact the stringer had said 'look they're really interested...' ()

Then I started getting letters from women who couldn't afford sanitary towels at all, and I hadn't thought about that. I mean I know what it's like, you'll buy a packet of ten, and you tend to stretch out, make the one last a bit longer than necessary, if you haven't got enough money in your purse. But then I had a letter from a Nursing Officer, and she's said 'there are women who can't afford to use them after childbirth, and my midwives are coming back quite complacent about this, and, why won't they do anything? this is awful in 1982'. And I thought 'god, it really is, I hadn't realised', but I got quite a few letters like that, from women who said 'look I

can't afford them at all'.

So I just kept on writing letters, kept ringing people up. Ringing papers up - most papers didn't want to know. One Sunday paper just said, 'look it's just not nice, we've got a policy', she said: 'I don't care who you contact in Fleet Stret, there's a policy, none of them will do anything about it, because it's considered rather vulgar.' And I said, 'christ, you've just done an article on incest, I wouldn't bring their Sunday paper in the house because I've got daughters, and I don't want them reading the shit that goes into the papers', and she said, 'well it's policy...' I don't believe it!"

12.2 THE MEDIA

Frustration with the Press is one of the strongest recurrent themes when Denise talks about the campaign. Each time anything does appear about the issue in the mass media, there has been a huge response from women - but most of the time journalists refuse to deal with it.

"the attitude has been, by men,one of, you know, one of hilarity and dismissal. We run the papers, we run Fleet Street, we'll put in it whatever we want. If we don't want you in it, we won't put you in it. And that includes so many other things that women have beefed about."

"And yet they all expressed surprise at the amount of people that had signed... But then as much as they were amazed by the number of people, I think that they thought - it must be loony women. And also some of them wanted to know what men are involved?"

Listening to Denise one has the sense of being pulled back and forth, between the brick wall that the press has put up and the energy of the response from women. Denise brought a cardboard box full of letters out to show me, letters tied up in bundle of a hundred - all of them sympathetic to the campaign, many of them furious.

"there are times when you look at it and you think, well perhaps it all is trivial, perhaps I should be doing something totally different. Is it trivial? And you sit down, read a few of the letters, and you think, no, it's not. No, I'm in danger of being conned! It would have been a lot easier if bodies like the GLC (Greater London Council) had said, right, here's a grant, - at least I could have thought, well I can make the phone calls I want..."

In this kind of campaigning, the media is the crucial institution one has to deal with, and Denise had clearly learnt to see it as primarily acting in the interests of the dominant group, as perpetuating the dominant ideology.

"It's changed us, hasn't it? (addressed to her husband Paul) This campaign, how we view things... I'm not

> half as gullible as I was either. I really used to believe what I was shown, the printed word... Because it was your way of learning, unless you had someone really good that talked to you - communication was the written word. You never doubted it, you never doubted your history lesson..."

However the media in this country is not monolithic, and Denise has a few success stories to tell - in the telling they seem random, but perhaps patterns can be discerned. She also learnt a thing or two about how to manipulate the media, unwelcome knowledge as this was.

It seems that the closer to the centre of power, the less likely the papers are to cover this issue. Local papers have been very good, often publishing sympathetic articles, or printing letters that women in their areas send in to them. Denise once asked one of their reporters why this was:

> "they said 'when you work in Fleet Street and you're a journalist, you don't work in the same room as the editor, but if you're on a local paper, you're in the same room, and they just can't handle half a dozen women saying 'when are you doing to do it?'! (and more women work on local papers."

But of the natoinal dailies, only The Daily Mirror has carried an article of any length. Denise's story about when she wrote a letter to The Times is very revealing:

> "I wrote a letter to The Times, I just had the

feeling it would be OK, and the guy, Robin Young from The Times rang up, and he said 'I didn't know sanitary wear was taxed, I think that's awful, I'll do something on it'. And I thought, thank god, at least one national paper will do it, because all the local ones had done it, not just my local, local in other areas, because all the time women were writing to me saying what can we do? I'd just say do whatever you feel is right, and if you want to contact your media, your women's club, your newspapers, then do, and they were. There were women out there working really hard.. they took it on their own bit, and they spread it... and I was really pleased about The Times. And then Robin Young rang back the next day, and said 'my Editor won't let me use the word "Sanitary towel" in The Times () He said 'you can't use it', he said 'we've had a real row over this', he said 'it's come very close to me almost saying right that's it...' I said, 'I don't believe it!' So he said, 'well, he just won't let me use it'. He said 'the only thing I can do, is I'll give it to Alan Ruisbridger on The Guardian...' he said, 'Have you tried The Guardian?' and I said, 'Listen (laughter) I've been writing to them all for so long, and ringing them up. The Women's Page is the worst of all... they didn't want to know... they must have had half a dozen letters from me... and from friends...'"

Alan Ruisbridger did put a jokey item in his Diary column,

but did not put the campaign's address in. After much prompting Ann Hills put the address in her column on the Women's Page, and about 100 women wrote to Denise for petitions.

Denise had also hoped that Robin Day would do an item on the campaign on "World at One" (BBC Radio 4), but he replied to her that the programme "does not lend itself to pressure groups, however notorious". Denise is particularly irritated with the Guardian, as it is supposed to be the most leftist-liberal Fleet Street newspaper - and has had a fairly pro-feminist women's page.

Radio stations have from time to time shown an interest in the campaign, and because radio has to be done face-to-face, this is were Denise got the clearest picture of what she was dealing with. On one occasion she was subjected to outright sexual harassment when she phoned Capital Radio - more of this incident later. More typical reactions would be these, at the BBC:

> "it was, oh, horrible, sitting in this studio () The men that were in the room, in the control room, they were getting ready to move studios, they were sportsmen or something, and Catherine was in there asking them to sign the petition, and when they heard what I was saying they went 'eugh' and shot out of the door, and she said 'what's the matter with you?' and they just said, 'ooh, well, not staying here'... they weren't going to be tarnished by it all."

The same kind of thing happened when she went on Channel 4's "Friday Alternative":

> "It was this tiny little studio, and these two chaps looking frightfully sort of embarrassed about the whole thing...although the woman in charge of the programme was very nice and helpful."

Again there was contradictory feedback from this programme, because when they took an audience survey poll on which item from the series people would most like to see repeated, hers came top, upstaging even Arthur Scargill (then leader of the Yorkshire National Union of Mine-. workers).

12.2.1 Women's Magazines

One might expect that 'womens' magazines would be more likely to be willing to cover this issue - that it would be less problematic for them, than for papers aimed primarily at men and which reflect the world of men. This expectation has been borne out in part, for all the glossy monthly women's magazines did cover the campaign. Cosmopolitan even rang Denise to ask if she could cope with the response if they wrote about it before doing so!

Denise reports a conversation with the editor of Options. then the newest of the monthlies, which reveals class divisions among women in their attitudes towards this issue:

> "I rang her up, and she said, 'oh my dear, well it's

> just not news is it? I mean it's not very gay' and I said, 'well I suppose bleeding isn't that jolly, no', and she said 'well I feel exactly the same thing about glasses,I have to pay a frightful lot', she said, 'and these people on social securtiy can get their glasses much cheaper'. And I said, 'er but both sexes are affected by glasses, and you can buy National Health glasses,you know'. So she said, 'oh, they're hideous', I said, 'no they're not, I've got a pair'. So later after something had happened, the newspaper or something, they asked for a short statement..."

But none of the weekly women's magazines (eg Woman, Woman's Weekly), which have a more working class image, would even consider writing about it. This difference is difficult to understand: Denise speculates that the weeklies are particularly dependent upon their advertising income and dare not say anything to alienate advertisers.

We can see some difference between the ideologies promoted by the two groups of papers. Magazines like Woman are committed to a very conventional image of women as happy housewives and mothers, while the monthlies tend to promote a 'career-girl' stereotype which may perhaps permit some indignation on behalf of womankind.

12.2.2 Dealing with the Press

In the course of her work, Denise has learnt the hard way how cynical the Press can be. She was willing to manipulate

them in some ways. So when an MP, Michael O'Halloran, wrote a letter to a constituent suggesting that the issue was unimportant because women could use nappies:

> "I'd realised by then that the papers don't want, the awful truths of what is happening to women, they actually want something which is newsworthy, something that is shocking, something they can say, 'ha, look at that'. So I thought, well Michael O'Halloran has done it, they'll use him, and they did..."

However she drew the line at using her own life as material for entertaining journalism:

> "I've either got to sell myself to the journalists... someone in Joan Lestor's office said 'well look ring up The Guardian, or write to them and say you want them to do an article on you, you know, you're a working class woman in a council house, running this all from home...' And I thought well I don't want them to do it, if they can't write about the women that the petition is about, then bugger it, I'm not prepared to go that far. If they'd contacted me and said, that'd be different...() But I'm not going to start selling me or selling other people. "Woman's Hour" did contact me and say, 'will you give us the names and addresses of those women that have written to you who are in the most trouble?' and I said 'no, I'll write to them first'. And most of them said 'no there was just one that said yes, and I wrote back to them and said - I'll come, Joan Lestor will come... but these women are so vulnerable at the moment

anyway, and most of them just said 'oh god I'd be too scared to do it.'

And that was it, they never answered, they never said, 'oh we realise, we understand', that was it, it was just dropped."

To some extent we can understand how the media related to this campaign in conventional political terms. It was the more leftist papers, from the Morning Star to the I Daily Mirror, which mentioned the campaign. However Denise noticed a pattern in the journalists' behaviour towards her which points to something more specific to the issue. More of a micro-political process.

Many times a preliminary contact would seem positive and then it would be dropped, the journalist would never ring back. This occurred in many cases, ranging from The Daily Express to Radio London to Labour Weekly. As Denise came to understand it:

"I think that, much as the journalists say 'no this isn't newsworthy', or 'no we can't mention this', I think it's their own reaction to it, and the editor's reaction to it, and I did make the point on LBC that if the editor of The Times' mother hadn't had a period, he wouldn't be here!" "It's the power thing, you're doing something that nobody can control. And everything else can be controlled."

Some examples illustrate this point. Radio London - Denise

had talked to Robbie Vincent on the phone-in and he had encouraged her to push the campaign. She wrote again later saying how about backing it: no answer. Later she rang their news office:

> "He said, 'oh god!' I said, 'what's the matter?' He said, 'Oh you've put me in a really embarrassing position'. So I said 'why?' And he said 'well I think what you're doing is right, but I really don't think I can put it out on the air'. So I said 'Why not?' So he said 'well, oh god... oh look, I just don't know what to say', so I said, 'go on, do it.' So he said, 'I'm going to take a poll in the room, I've got some women in the room with me, we'll take a vote'. () And he never rang back."

Two male journalists turned up at the House of Commons when they went there to deliver the petition. One had come from Labour Weekly:

> "We tried to get him to sign the petition - he wouldn't: 'I can't sign everything that people give me.. if I signed everything...' And so Catherine (Smith) said, 'well don't you agree with it then?' she won't let anything drop, and he said 'well there's all sorts of other important things, isn't there, this is very trivial... I'm just here doing my job...'"

> "... and a bloke from the Sun who had signed the petition ages ago, turned up. I said 'does that mean you're going to put it in your paper?' and he said 'oh god no, I can't. I'm just here to support you.'"

The Times was a similar story. It seems that these men are at first interested, but soon find that within their office they will attract the stigma of the subject to themselves if they raise it. What begins to become visible here is a process, not so much simply of conservative media blocking protest, as of men acting as men, refusing to attack their own sexual privilege.

12.3 SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Denise Flowers has also been subject to outright sexual harassment by men in a few instances. She tells two revealing stories - in each case an individual man or a small group of men acts against her in a way which is formally not approved of by society. In each case, as Jalna Hanmer (1977) has described, the authorities collude in the act against the woman by failing to control the man.

Denise's experience of the two instances of harassment are bound up together, and very clearly connected in her mind with the way in which journalists have treated her generally. She tells the stories:

> "Anna Coote did the action at El Vino's (the Fleet Street bar) just at the time I delivered the petition. And on Capital Radio they had a phone-in, and they were saying 'come along Anna, this is all a bit silly, frightful women's stuff, a lot of fuss about nothing.' And she said 'no I don't think so, actually,

if you've got something which you feel strongly about it's up to you to go out and do it, because no one else is going to do it'. 'Oh well we think you're very silly, anybody else out there equally as silly?' so I thought yes, I'll risk the phone bill once more, and I rang Capital and said 'yeah, I've been trying to do something, and the treatment I've had from journalists is pretty paltry'. Well they said, 'hang on then', and then he came back on and he said 'you'll be on in about three minutes' and I thought all right, that's not too bad, and he said 'Are you listening?' So I said yes, and he played me a tape, of someone suffering from gonhorrea, syphilis, you know, all the VD diseases, what to do if you've got it. It was a looped tape, because it was faint, and it got louder and I realised I'd been listening to the same thing three times, and it stopped and I said 'yes', and he said 'did you hear that?' And I said, 'yes, what was that to do with what I want to say?' and he said 'think about it', and I said 'oh god, you're trying to say that the subject's poxy are you?' and he said 'yes exactly' - he said, 'we've got a little tape at Capital for people like you.' So I said 'oh have you?' So I said 'you were there, when I delivered the petition, you interviewed Joan Lestor, when I was there'. And he said 'yes I know, and as far as we're concerned, it's a complete load of balls, a load of shit, isn't it' And I said 'Oh right, is that your considered opinion, or company opinion? ' He said,

'that's what we think up here'. So I said 'right, give me your name', so he gave me his name, he said his name was Brian Dixon,and I put the phone down. And I was just shaking, after, I just shook and shook."

Denise complained to the Independent Broadcasting Authority about Capital.

"Then I got a phone call in the evening from a bloke saying, 'um, have you made a complaint against Capital Radio?' So I said 'yeah' and he said 'what for?' and I told him and he said 'OK, thank you' no he didn't say that, he said 'OK', and just put the phone down.

Then later on I got another phone call from a public relations officer... First of all she said, 'what it is, is there's somebody out there with a CB rig'. () After that I rang them next day and they retracted that, and they said it was a GPO thing. So I rang my Area Manager () and he said 'It's Capital'. Capital were quite snotty about it, they just said 'no, no it wasn't us, not at all'.

(The IBA woman) said this sort of thing has been happening before - I said, 'Has it? Well don't you think you owe it to your listeners to tell them that if they ring Capital'... I said, 'You've got a confidential Helpline going this week on abortion , what happens if somebody rings up and says... and somebody plays them that, that's going to push them

over the top. I really think you should let them know." And he just said 'No, we can't let them know, because we'd frighten them off'. And the another guy I spoke to said 'no we can't let them know because we'd have too many people ringing up'."

SL: "Being angry?"

"Yes, one was saying they'd jam the lines, the other was saying they'd lose all their listeners."

Around the same time Denise was being subjected to harassment from another quarter: an obscene phone caller.

"The thing was that for, ever since the first piece of journalistic stuff that came out locally I was getting this guy ringing up and sending me pornography through the post, he'd done that twice, and that really shook me. He'd been changing the model's name to my name and fairly explicit letters, just ringing up and not saying anything, just being there, and that had been freaking me out for over a year, and then having it, me making a phone call, I'm paying for it, and I'm getting an obscene phone call back and I thought, I can't handle this."

"So I was pretty angry, and upset by (the incident with Capital) and as I say, this guy kept ringing. I mean, he'd stop for months and then he'd just start again, and in the end, the kids were saying, 'it's that bloke on the phone again'. And I just said, 'Right'. Paul (Denise's husband) had rung the police,

and I'd had that letter, with all the pictures and that in, and it just made me throw up, literally, it made me throw up. He rang the police, because I didn't even want to talk to a man then, let alone a policeman, and they just said, 'well there's nothing we can do, really, it's probably a child, it happens all the time, you've got to ignore it. Make sure she keeps a lock on the door if she's in on her own, and, you know, tear it up, put it down the toilet'."

SL: "A child?"

"Well I thought it could very well be... but not an infant - I mean, anybody that's got the power in my eyes isn't a child anyway. But their reaction was very much, well it happens all the time, so forget it. So when he rings now, I put the phone under the carpet, and leave him, hanging on the phone, because he's listening to nothing, but he's putting his phone bill up. And if he is living with his parents, they are going to want to know, why is the phone bill so high plus it doesn't give him any satisfaction.() But that was quite unnerving at the time."

SL: "Frightening?"

"Yes it was frightening... and obviously getting rejection letters, keep getting rejection slip letters back - it's not all that wonderful. There's so many people who just say 'no we can't do anything about it.'"

SL: "What did he say?"

"Nothing - he was just there on the end of the

phone.() He wrote two letters to me. One was full of stuff from a magazine, pornography, just basic stuff he'd bought from a shop I think, and he'd written my name in place of, you know they write these ghastly stories, he'd put my name in place of the model's name. And 'you know I love you' and 'I'm in love with you' and 'you know you're in love with me' and 'what I want to do with you' and all the rest. I read the first one, because the phone calls happened first... it went on, about four or five on the trot, in an afternoon, it kept ringing, and he'd just be there () and it just went on... every time I put the phone down, it would ring... and in the end, I left it off all evening. And the next day he was back doing it again, so I had the phone intercepted for two weeks, but that just means it phones the operator, and she says 'what number do you want?' and then she connects you. So after two weeks, the day it came off, he was back again. And I thought 'you shit' - I was starting to get angry by then, and frightened, because I didn't know how old he was and then the stuff came through the post. ()

They said I could have my number changed for £15 - so I thought, well, poke it, there's so many people need my number, I'm not changing my number, with the tenants thing, we usually have phone calls each day, about rehousing or someting, and I have to..., my number's available, and I just thought, why should I back off? cut myself off, for this guy? Perhaps that's

what they want, perhaps it isn't a bloke, perhaps it's a group of people who've decided that's the right way to shut me up. You get quite paranoid when somebody you don't know is doing it all the time... So in the end, another letter came, so I thought, I know what the first one is like, I won't read this one. And Paul said 'well show it to me first, in case there are any threats in it', and he read it and he was so angry, he was really furious and every time it rang when he was here he'd just scream at this bloke, and he would hang up, he'd always hang up."

SL: "Did you shout at him ever?"

"Oh yes, the first time, I really swore at him, I just let him have everything I'd got. But it didn't get me anywhere - totally powerless. And he also, wrote and arranged to meet me - Paul went to the place to look for him () He was just furious that somebody could come in here...

But now... if he phones up I'll torment him by not answering. I'll make his phone bill go up... and if his letters come, I don't read them. () And he lives really near, he lives about 5 miles away (from the post mark)."

Denise has said how much these incidents upset her - the incident with Capital Radio happened just after they delivered the petition, and she connects it with feeling very bad on that day, which was perhaps the most public appearance the campaign has made:

> "I found that quite disturbing, specially having been up to London with all these signatures and all these people around. Mind you, when we did get there, there were a lot of people I didn't know - all these PPCs (Prospective Parliamentary Candidates) turned up, that Joan had invited - they were all fawning around Joan.. Some of them had never heard of the campaign at all. But there were some women that turned up that had been doing it..."

Denise Flowers has listened to the reactions of two further groups of men - men in public life, politicians and others who have felt moved to comment on the issue, and the men she is involved with in her private life.

12.4 MEN IN PUBLIC LIFE

Every time this issue is raised in Parliament, it is met with joking behaviour from male MPs. When Value Added Tax on sanitary wear was raised from 8% to 15% in 1979, Miss Jo Richardson moved an amendment to the Act to exempt it from taxation, arguing that these products could not be regarded as a luxury. Mr. Robert Kilroy-Silk supported her, suggesting to a fellow Member that

> "if (he) finds it embarrassing and sensitive, he should remove the issue from controversy and discussion in the chamber... Next year he can introduce an amendment to exempt female sanitary

> products from value added tax. I promise him that if he does that neither I nor any of my honourable friends will make a speech on that occasion". (Hansard July 1979)

Arguing against her, Mr. Peter Rees said "I feel almost guilty of a gross indecency in suggesting to the House that there is possibly a different point of view" and went on to propose that razor blades are an equivalent commodity. Throughout the short debate, the "sensitivity" of the subject is referred to repeatedly, and an elaborate overpoliteness is observed in all speeches.

Since then, Joan Lestor has raised the issue in the House on several occasions, arguing that it is a sexually discriminatory tax. On one occasion (15 July 1982), she addressed herself to Mr. Bruce-Gardyne and in part of his reply he said "I am glad to say that, in my experience most women have a tendency to use soap." The Speaker prevented moves to ask him to apologise for this comment. Silvia Rodgers (1981) has written revealingly about the way in which the British House of Commons operates as a 'men's house'.

Another MP (as mentioned above) made a revealing comment in a letter to a constituent. Michael O'Halloran of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) wrote:

> "... I think, however that your argument does not hold water. Women need not buy sanitary towels - they always used to use washable nappies - which puts them on an equal basis with men who need not shave or buy razor blades."

As we have seen, Denise Flowers publicised this remark and many women were extremely angry - many wrote to Denise about it, and at least one sent him "things" through the post!

Outside Parliament, another man stated his point of view, from a rather surprising quarter. Denise sent the petition and a letter asking for support to an organisation called Women's Health Concern. She received an unsigned reply, dated 23.2.1983, saying:

> "We do not agree with the wording which is contentious and offensive so we suggest you change it. Leave out 'taxing (already overpriced items is insulting to all) women' - substitute 'and sanitary protection is part of health care which is supposed to be exempt from VAT'".

Denise wrote back explaining her reasons for chosing this wording and received (29.3.1983) the following from Gerald I.M. Swyer, the Chairman of their Medical Advisory Board:

> "In my opinion when one has a case which is soundly based on reason and logic it is not furthered by using intemperate and unnecessarily offensive language. To use such language only increases the resistance of those who might otherwise have been neutral but will now regard the petitioners as violently opinionated and unsound. Your case I think is unanswerable; it is therefore a pity that you were unable to modify the language of the petition in such a way as would have left no grounds for offense - real or imagined - by

those who might be inclined to regard it as a piece of clamorous women's lib."

During a telephone conversation Denise says he also said to her:

"I don't suppose you've got any statistics of the amount of women who can't afford it, and anyway I would need documented evidence - you'll probably find those women that are using bits of rag and things have got colour televisions and smoke all day."

12.5 MEN IN PRIVATE LIFE

Denise has had support in her campaign from a few men - her own husband, a friend and a group of 'men against sexism'. She says about these last, however, "they said 'what can they do to help?' And I've told them what they can do to help and they can't handle it! They said, there weren't very many people at the last meeting, they weren't used to being asked to do anything, women usually say 'piss off we want to do it ourselves'". The friend was Tom Cassidy, a man in his late 70s who she worked with on tenants' rights - she says he felt strongly for the working-class women who are affected by it.

The other men in her family have either belittled her involvement in the campaign, or ignored it, though she feels her father would have put her down whatever she was doing. Her neighbours equally, are not pleased:

"I'd have loved to have had support from friends, it would have been really nice if the area had supported it rather than just, in the last few months, the Labour Party."

"There's a guy that lives next door and he's in his late seventies, and he knows about it, and he won't actually come out and talk about it, but he's talked about all sorts of other things, the women at Greenham,...() It's awful, hardly anyone in Hampton wants to have anything to do with it!"

Denise's husband, Paul, has clearly given her very important support in her involvement in the campaign. He was present some of the time I was interviewing her. I asked him:

"what did you think when she started?

"I didn't think it was going to be as big. I thought it was important, and I agreed with it, but I didn't think it would catch on. But it did.

D: It was a bit surprising, wasn't it, sitting in bed being showered... the kids came upstairs with the letters, because the postman would grumble and put through bundles of 20 at a time. You could hear him, you'd go, 20, 40, 60 - and the kids would come and say 'ooh' and I hid under the duvet one day, and I said 'oh I can't cope'..."

Their relationship, clearly very close, is strengthened, if anything, by adversity. Talking about his attitudes to menstruation, Paul and Denise referred to her own parents,

making the contrast between her father's conservative attitudes and their own. Paul is in general sympathetic to Denise's feminism, though at one point while I was with them he said to her "The only thing I would object to, sometimes you seem to make things more important than they really are."

It was clear that Paul was being made to reconsider many things men can usually take for granted. Denise told me that once she had left an article on self-examination, with photographs of cervixes seen with a speculum, lying around, and Paul had asked her to put it away so that the children wouldn't see it. When Denise asked him why, he said "I don't know, I just think you should move it". I didn't gather what the outcome was, but being constantly challenged in this way could only help to make him examine his own behaviour.

He said that he had recently seen Denise's blood in the bath, and that in 13 years of marriage this was the first time he had seen it:

> "it amazed me... I just saw it, actually coming out... fantastic... it didn't repulse me, it didn't make me feel funny at all. I'd never been worried by it, but I'd never actually seen it - to see this coming out, I thought, jesus, it's incredible... it was, fantastic ... I thought it was magic."

Paul's support for the campaign had even gone so far as

taking the petition in to his workplace - he told me that the most unlikely of his workmates took a copy of it.
I include here these 'personal' aspects of Denise's life because any involvement in sexual politics always has important effects on one's personal relationships and vice versa. Denise says that her friends, apart from her women's studies class "just look disapproving" if she speaks about the campaign. If her husband had also behaved like that, or had been openly hostile, it seems likely that she could not have sustained both her heavy involvement in the campaign and her marriage.

Although a few individual men have been sympathetic, the overwhelming male reaction to this campaign has been negative, and men's control of institutions like Parliament and the media has ensured its marginalisation. Men's response can be summed up quite exactly in White's (1959) words, where he describes the social sanctions behind any etiquette: "adverse comment or criticism, ridicule, and ostracism".

Here we see a case where women have attempted to initiate public talk about menstruation, to raise an issue of concern to them but not of any benefit to men as a group. In contrast to the case of mood change related to the menstrual cycle, where the notion of 'premenstrual tension' carries with it the possibility of reinforcing stereotypical notions about women's unpredictability and

lack of self-control, women's efforts to speak on this subject have been met with little but contemptuous dismissal. The combination of many deaf ears and a few aggressive, harassing responses has efficiently kept this female protest confined to the periphery of public life.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have tried to generate ideas which could enable us to describe and make sense of the social meanings of menstruation in the modern British dominant culture.

One crucial problem which I began with was that of whether one could or should consider attitudes towards menstruation primarily within one culture only, or whether cross-cultural comparisons would be more appropriate. Behind this question is the issue of how determinant biological factors are in human societies: just how flexible are people's responses to menstruation? The majority of existing theories about the origins of social reactions to menstruation seek their cause within some essential truth about the physical process of menstruation. It was necessary to reconsider this approach both theoretically and empirically.

Although there are feminist versions of the essentialist approach, for instance that which regards men's discomfort in relation to menstruation as evidence of their fear of women's power, symbolised by the womb,its logic can only be deterministic: it does not allow for the possibility of change.

My theoretical framework has been what I have called 'social constructionist radical feminism' - that is, an

analysis of male political power over women which regards such domination as socially rather than biologically created. Throughout my work I have argued against explanations for present-day beliefs and practices which are based upon unproveable allegations about either prehistory or 'universal' male reactions to female bodies. Many existing theories which purport to explain behaviour around menstruation depend upon a taken-for-granted understanding of its relationship to the process of reproduction. It is crucial to feminist thinking that 'sex' the biological base, be distinguished from 'gender', the social interpretations which are placed upon it. Too many of the justifications for women's oppression derive from ideologically embroidered notions about biology.

I have also found that essentialist explanations cannot be supported by the evidence. Cross-cultural research throws up an amazingly wide range of meanings and interpretations which women and men have given to menstruation. Even within one society, our own, it is not possible to make simple statements about the meaning of menstruation. It is not a unitary phenomenon, not a single thing, socially - menstruation means all manner of things to all manner of people. It is used as part of several kinds of discourse, both publicly and privately. Which of these an individual will be aware of or focus on will depend upon a large number of factors relating to their particular social location.

My image of social life is one which attempts to balance the individual person's ability to construct her or his own social world with the influence of the power structures of the society: principally those of gender, class and race. Understandings of menstruation are very various: each of my investigations threw up rich, complex ethnographic data, but they are not chaotic.

Because I do not see attitudes towards menstruation as determined in a strong way by the physical facts of menstruation, it makes sense to study a single culture, to map out the specific connections made in different contexts by different individuals within that culture. Such findings, though, will not be transferable: only further close study of other cultures could discover whether or not patterns are similar elsewhere.

I will first draw out some of the themes which have emerged from my study, then I will return to some further questions of theory.

This has been a difficult area to research, since the etiquette which is a large part of the subject of research forbids the investigation itself. I have therefore attempted to "triangulate" (Denzin 1970) my study by looking for evidence from a number of sources - individual men; the 'literature', including data from research on women; gynaecology texts and related writings; and the experience of the campaign to ban VAT on sanitary wear. I

found this to be an extremely valuable approach, for each new data-source shed light on what I had learnt previously. It prevented me, I hope, from developing in any acute form the kind of tunnel vision which emphasizes the influence of one power group, or one kind of discourse, above all others.

I chose to concentrate mainly upon men's point of view, because men's attitudes generally seemed to me to be an underresearched area of gender relations, considering their influence on society as a whole. This has been the most unexpected aspect of my research, for other people and for myself. I discovered a tremendously strong expectation that research on 'women's issues' should involve interviewing women, and found it something of a struggle to resist it. Was my choice correct?

By focusing upon men I did indeed discover things I had not already known about. The effort to take an initiative, to act upon men in the powerful way that sociological investigation involves, produced both positive and negative results. It produced some fascinating data, and turned out to be a very interesting exercise in methodology. However it had its costs. I found that much of what I learnt was most uncongenial knowledge - it was extremely disturbing to feel personally attacked by one's own data. Further, I felt that this created problems in interpreting my data. I became acutely conscious of the extent to which doing sociology depends upon the sociologist's empathy with her

subjects, her pre-existing ideas about how their minds work. I could and did attempt to empathise with my interviewees, to an extent, but because of my own simultaneous location as researcher and as woman, the object of male talk, I often did not wish to take the effort very far. It was a slightly insane position to be in, and an interesting anomaly as an example of the power-structure of a research project.

I used an American study of women (Merves 1983) to avoid some of these problems by working from a structure derived by Merves from the women's version of reality. I did not wish to allow men to set the agenda entirely. Setting the two side by side, it became clear that women's consciousness of menstruation differs from men's in a great variety of ways- not only do the sexes speak about it in different language, but their consciousnesses on the subject have quite different constituent parts. For example, I discovered in my interviews a whole discourse on menstruation which exists among men only, a "sick joking" which forms part of sexist male culture. Much men's talk about menstruation sees it as sexual, in a way which women may not. Information about menstruation is often shared between women and men only in heterosexual relationships, and not in any other kind of relationship, which further ties it to sexuality in men's eyes.

The US women in Merves' study said that it was in relation to menstrual pain and to mood change that they were most likely to discuss menstruation with another person.

Therefore I have examined these areas of men's talk particularly closely. Looking at male attitudes to menstrual pain one can see very plainly the range of social practices involved: an etiquette which dictates silence to women; an elaborate denial of the reality of the pain, resulting from men's failure to empathise with women. Gynaecology can be analysed as one form of male discourse on menstruation, and the notion of psychosomatic pain must be considered in this sexual-political context.

I do not regret prioritizing the male version of menstruation, but I would be very interested now to discover more about women's views. I am aware that I drew freely on my own experience and that of my friends and acquaintances, as well as on anecdotal evidence from fiction and auto-biographical writings, to fill in what sometimes appeared as a sort of residual category, the female version of the story. It would be far more satisfactory to be able to look at a variety of different women's experiences in a systematic way.

I would, however, defend my methods, in that a female reader can, I assume, read herself into the picture, and can use information about men to understand her own life. When the missing data is that which might elucidate men's part in whatever social process we are considering, the reader can gain only the insights which derive from comparing one's own experiences with those of other women.

One of the forms in which the essentialist approach I discussed earlier is expressed is in the idea of a pan-cultural 'menstrual taboo', an idea which features in both feminist and non-feminist writing on the subject.

I have argued that the notion of a 'taboo' puts the phenomenon within the area of supernatural belief, when such beliefs are largely absent from present-day British culture. It implies also that menstruation may never be spoken of, which also misrepresents the situation. In fact, I suggest, what we have is a menstrual etiquette, part of a larger etiquette of behaviour between the sexes, which governs who may say what to whom, and in what context. Women are discredited by any behaviour which draws attention to menstruation, while men may more freely refer to it if they choose to. Thus the etiquette expresses and reinforces status distinctions.

Another of the problems with the idea of a taboo is that it is gender-blind - it erases power differences to present an image of 'society' or 'culture' on the one hand, which makes the rules, and 'people' on the other, who are bound by them. Closer examination shows that the social rules around menstruation are very much about gender.

One variant of feminist thinking on the subject of menstruation has been to suggest that the 'menstrual taboo' was invented by women, perhaps in some matriarchal past, to keep men in their place. I have reexamined the sources of

this idea, and find them illogical and suspect as data, and anti-feminist in their assumptions.

The separation between the public and the private spheres is very marked when we focus upon menstruation. I have looked at two examples where issues related to menstruation are brought into the public sphere: talk about 'premenstrual tension' and the campaign against tax on sanitary wear. In the case of the campaign, there is evidence that many women pressed for the issue to be made public, and that men resisted this pressure to a very great degree. However premenstrual tension is now regularly discussed in the national press. I have considered the way in which the idea of premenstrual tension has been constructed, creating a medical disease-type category with very negative connotations for women out of the continuum of physical and mental change which the menstrual cycle produces. While women have wanted to be able to speak publicly about mood change related to the menstrual cycle, 'premenstrual tension' as it has emerged is an idea which has many benefits for men. It can be used publicly to discredit women generally, and privately to undermine a particular woman at particular moments.

By contrast the campaign against VAT on sanitary wear is strikingly unappealing to men. Although the tax is one of a whole category of tax which causes hardship to the poor rather than the rich, working-class men have not notably taken up the cause on behalf of or in sympathy with

their sisters, wives and daughters. To do so would be to brave the contempt and near horror with which male culture regards sanitary wear, to men the most unattractive aspect of an unattractive subject. Further, the VAT campaign cannot entirely avoid association with menstrual blood, which the notion of PMT more easily does, referring instead to those intangible forces, hormones. Looking at these two cases we can see that the terms and conditions under which it takes place, as well as the content, affect whether or not public talk around menstruation is beneficial to women. 'Taboo-breaking' is not necessarily liberatory in this case, as in the case of sexuality.

I have also tried to analyse the medical discourse around menstruation, both generally and in relation particularly to mood change and to menstrual pain. I have seen gynaecology as one form of androcentric ideology, rather than as the crucial mode of discourse on this subject. In this context I have had to confront the difficult question which always concerns medical sociologists - that of the epistemological status of medical knowledge. One can clearly see the ideological basis of so much of what is called medical fact. So is medicine nothing but a social control institution? Is it possible, and indeed, is it desirable, to rid oneself of any concern with the truth or practical usefulness of medical beliefs?

For this thesis I have investigated an extremely narrow range of experience within this society - narrow in time-span and narrow culturally, and there is immense scope for

further research to extend this range. I would have liked to have found out more about both other cultural traditions within Britain, and about the past, but although I did turn up various data, I have restricted myself to what I felt I could interpret. Attitudes to menstruation depend upon so many other social factors: gender relationships, beliefs about sexuality, pollution beliefs, religious beliefs, material conditions of various kinds, class attitudes, systems of medical knowledge - to name only a few.

I have tried to draw out, from what I could learn, some of the processes through which women are oppressed by men. I have pointed to male-only groupings which men described to me as sources of a particularly crude form of anti-woman ideology. More frequently recognised institutions like medicine and the media have also featured. I have tried to consider changes over time especially in relation to attitudes towards sexuality, and have analysed the new ideology of male-oriented 'sexual liberation' as well as the older more conventional 'home and family' one. We have seen how pollution beliefs and etiquette pattern relations between the sexes so that women are constantly reminded of our powerlessness, and men may be regularly reassured that their masculine privileges remain unchallenged. The interview material shows clearly, too, how individual men manipulate the range of ideas available to them in their relationships with individual women. There are also some interesting congruences between individual men's descriptions of their personal reactions and medical men's

considered opinions on menstrual problems. Male power can be seen expressed through a number of different institutions and through individuals.

Self-hatred is to me one of the saddest symptoms of women's oppression. Menstruation has been one of the foci for my own self-hatred, and this is why I have wanted to look into its social meanings. I needed to thoroughly disrupt the stupid, but powerful, line of thought which both denies my pain and inconvenience and at the same time regards them as justifications for my social inferiority. Shame blocks self-expression. Mistrust of one's body creates a very weak basis from which to attempt to gain greater power over one's own life. I hope that my work will be of some use to other women seeking to construct a better understanding of their own experience of menstruation.

APPENDIX:

WOMEN PROTEST AGAINST TAX ON SANITARY WEAR

The material presented here has two purposes: firstly to give background information on the campaign to ban VAT on sanitary wear, clarifying the context of the male reactions as described in Chapter 12, and secondly to give space to some female voices on the subject of menstruation, which form a kind of counterpoint to the bulk of the thesis. The two parts cannot properly be separated, as each part of the process of political campaigning informs each other part. The first section of the appendix contains extracts from letters that women wrote to Denise Flowers, the co-ordinator of the campaign. The second section discusses the politics of the campaign generally, and of Denise Flowers herself in particular.

APPENDIX 1: THE LETTERS

Since she began her campaign, Denise Flowers has received many thousands of letters from women. Most of them briefly express support and ask for copies of the petition, but in some of them the women 'speak their minds'. Denise had kept those separate, as she bundled up and put away the 'routine' letters, and she showed them to me when I visited her. These letters reveal a remarkable slice of life - women tell about their lives and of their anger very directly and plainly. They tell something I have heard nowhere else of how some women experience menstruation. Clearly they represent no-one except themselves.

The letters are interesting in themselves,but they are also important in understanding about the campaign. Denise said to me more than once that at times when she thought about giving up the campaign, knowing about the letters made her go on with it - especially knowing of the women in particularly bad situations. "I hadn't thought about it."

I had wanted to quote from 31 letters and asked Denise Flowers to write to these women seeking permission for me to reproduce their words. I did the photocopying and paid for the postage. Twenty women replied to this letter, which was sent out up to two years after Denise had received the original letters. All of these gave their permission for their words to be used. Five wanted to

remain anonymous (one of these at her husband's insistence), and these are identified by numbers. Among the positive replies was one from a women of 80 who had previously written in criticising the campaign. She had since discovered that VAT "was on Sanitary Towels but not chargeable on baby napkins" (2b) and seemed to have changed her attitude to the issue, although she remained shocked at it being discussed in public. She and many others added more comments to their earlier ones. Mrs. Susan Pyke specified that she did not wish to be quoted in any feminist literature: "I am not a feminist, only a female... (I) feel that today's feminist movement is largely responsible for the breakdown of the family and the consequent demoralization of young people".

I will draw out the themes of the letters, quoting only from some of them, for many make the same points. Also many letters cover several of the themes I will identify.

Even among these few letters, a remarkable diversity of experience shows itself. Their authors range in age from 94 to 16 - some have four daughters and some are very aware of their childlessness; some are living in terrible poverty, others write from 'expensive' addresses.

Some themes appear over and over again. A great many of the letters refer to having felt strongly about the issue for some time - few write as if hearing of the campaign had brought it into their minds for the first time. Typical

letters begin:

> "This is something that has annoyed me for sometime but especially after my children were born, money was very short, lots of things to buy for baby and pads and tampons at such a ridiculous price!" (6)
>
> "Hurray! Somebody has at last decided to do something about us poor females." (Mari Lovell)

This contrasts strongly with the typical sympathetic man, such as Robin Young of The Times, who is shocked when he learns of this injustice from hearing about the campaign.

Appendix 1.1 : Men and Women

Interestingly, the letterwriters overwhelmingly see this more as an issue of sex discrimination than as a class question. They see it as a "man-made" tax, and a recurrent theme is that if men had periods, sanitary wear would be free. Working on the simple view that protest on this issue would arise from basically liberal sentiments becomes impossible when we see men directly accused over and over again, with little reference to 'society' or 'the establishment' or any such idea. Although many women speak of extra suffering because of poverty, none blame the rich or the upper class for this taxation, though several women refer to the companies that sell these products - one says "I feel I have a share in Dr. Whites as, as you know, I must have spent quite a small fortune on these sanitary products." (Dawn Perkins)

Other women are referred to in two contexts. Only one woman thinks a woman might have been responsible for the tax. She writes:

> "Please excuse me being crude but the person who thought about taxing these items must either be a bureaucratic male chauvinist pig who doesn't need to buy the goddam things, or some 80 year old old maid who probably still uses a great wad of linen like they did in my mum's younger days before ST's were made." (11)

The author of this letter calls her target an "old maid", I think, to challenge her womanhood, and makes her too old to be menstruating (though she does rather contradict herself!).

Mrs. Thatcher, the Prime Minister, is the only other woman referred to. Two women write in the same vein as the above and two others see her as having betrayed her sex:

> "I wrote to Mrs. Thatcher, when she came into power, because I thought at last, a woman in No. 10, now maybe we'll get treated right. But no chance..." (Jackie Underwood)

> "I... once was naive enough to believe that if we had a woman Prime Minister in power, she would 'see us right'. How wrong can one be?!" (Pat Parr)

But generally, men are held responsible - several letter-writers observe that most decision-makers are men:

> "I would like to say that if it were men that had

periods, that this petition would not be necessary at all. I have raised this subject on several occasions with 'men' and their attitude seems to be that if they have to pay for shaving gear why should we not have to pay for sanitary protection.... All these solutions are of course ridiculous and so is this abhorrent MAN-MADE IDEA (who else could think of anything so stupid) of not only having to pay for sanitary protection but having to pay VAT on it as well." (Emphasis in original) (C. Sinnett)

Men in women's private lives also provoked them:

"Strangely the people I tried to talk to about it laughed at my arguments. Today, after the radio broadcasting, I had another futile discussion with my family. My father... came up with the way-out answer that girls in the bush don't use anything of the sort and also live happily. I left the room in tears..." (17)

Finding money for sanitary wear produces extra problems for women who are financially dependent upon men:

"My husband always grumbles a bit for having to pay for them, but he realises that we need them." (11)

Appendix 1.2 : Michael O'Halloran

Anti-male feeling runs particularly high in relation to

Mr. O'Halloran the Social Democratic Party MP who suggested that women should use washable nappies:

> "The remark... is ludicrous and made me very angry. Trust a man not to understand. If I had to wash my towels per month, I would have my hands in an awful gore mixture and what an embarrassment putting my napkins on the line for all to see and calculate my personal dates. Bloody cheek! I am with you." (Dawn Perkins)

> "As for Mr. O'Halloran's stupid remark re: 'washable nappies', perhaps he would like to do some 'personal washing' for a couple of females, I feel sure he would quickly change his mind." (Barbara Whiting)

> "He wants to count himself lucky that he doesn't have to go through all the pains and aches of a period every month like us women do." (Mrs. Winnie West)

One woman sends a copy of a letter she sent to him:

> "...The suggestion you made about women wearing nappies is quite disgusting and degrading.
> You are obviously not aware of what a monthly period is like, I'll explain.
> A woman loses blood; in some cases lightly in other heavily with great clots for some 4-8 days approximately...
> How dare you make such a disgusting suggestion, your supposed to be a responsible person - you are an MP.

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> How dare you make such a disgusting suggestion, your supposed to be a responsible person - you are an MP.

> If you need further information regarding this I'll be pleased to help." (Mrs. B.E. Nuttall)

One recurrent theme was that soluble sanitary wear is part of 'modern life' and that suggesting it is unnecessary is to be pushing women back into bad old times:

> "The MP O'Halloran is trying to put us back into the 1800's." (Jackie Underwood)

> He is "offensive and antiquated if he thinks we should use washable nappies! The idea - in this day and age." (Joan Bowler)

> "surely in the Electronic-age it would be most unhygenic." (Enid Keating)

> "I was under the impression that people in his position were all in favour of keeping up with the times, but I suppose when it comes down to mere women 'anything goes'." (Mrs. J. Parton)

The fury that this remark inspired is interesting. It is not, I think, the suggestion itself that caused it, for women are spontaneously considering other alternatives to manufactured products - though they tend to be things like natural sponges rather than nappies. What is infuriating is that a man, who can know nothing about it, has made the suggestion. The connection so many women make with modernity is important too - more convenient ways of

dealing with periods have gone along with new options in many women's lives in larger things.

Appendix 1.3 : Contraception

Some women draw a comparison between sanitary wear and contraception:

> "As contraception is available free, I also think that there is a case for sanitary protection to be likewise. After all, you do not actually need contraception - just don't do it would be sufficient not to need it. Conversely how the hell are you going to stop having periods other than have you 'parts' removed?
>
> Perhaps this is a good idea - should we all go to our hospitals and ask for them to be removed? Should we sit in public places without wearing sanitary protection?" (C. Sinnett)

Appendix 1.4 : Special Circumstances

A number of women write that they feel especially aggrieved because of special circumstances which increase the burden the tax imposes upon them. These fall into several groups.

Daughters

Many women write that as mothers of growing daughters, they

have to buy sanitary wear for them as well as for themselves. Denise herself has two daughters, although neither has yet reached her menarche.

Two letters are from women with four daughters, another still needs sanitary wear herself and has three girls. Chris Stewart says she "would like to see ST's on prescription for schoolgirls!"

Another writes of her twelve year old daughter "who has seen her periods regularly for the past eighteeen months and has a very heavy loss... to help her through the first few days she wears regular tampons with them." (Enid Keating)

Heavy Bleeding

A great many other women write of their own heavy bleeding. It is quite likely, I think, that intensity of menstrual flow may be one more case where women are judging themselves by a false standard, for the normal range seems to be quite broad. From the evidence of medical texts it would appear that a large proportion of women, especially as they get older, have a flow which they find unacceptably heavy.

In any case, large numbers of Denise Flowers' correspondents complain of heavy bleeding. Some write that they have always had heavy, long periods:

> "I... use 3 packets of sanitary towels, which costs me £1.41 every month, which I consider a lot to pay for

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> "I... use 3 packets of sanitary towels, which costs me £1.41 every month, which I consider a lot to pay for

something I don't want and the 3 packets mentioned above is on a good month when I'm 'on' for only 7 days and I know a lot of other people who are as heavy as me." (Jackie Underwood)

Another, a 16 year old, writes that she has an irregular cycle due to her age, and heavy bleeding with that.

A number of women write of problems due to illness, and others of heavy and irregular bleeding towards the menopause. One woman writes that she has been in her menopause for 10 years:

"Finding an extra £2 or more pounds suddenly out of the housekeeping isn't easy as many others with similar problems must know. If we can't get a reduction in price, or even if we can, there is a strong case for women with special needs, such as after giving birth and during the menopause, or symptoms leading up to hysterectomies to get ST's on the National Health free of charge." (27)

<u>After Childbirth</u>

It is perhaps new mothers who experience the worst financial strain, for they must find money for the new baby as well as to deal with what can be a long period of bleeding. The first letter Denise received about women using rags related to this group. A senior midwife wrote:

"I receive reports from my midwives that while visiting mothers in their own homes, they very often

> are without and are making do with pieces of linen, towelling, etc. This strikes me as a return to the situation of the 1920s and 1930s and I feel strongly that midwives, through their College, should try to achieve more for the mothers in their care." (Miss E. Hynes, Divisional Nursing Officer, Glasgow Area)

She felt that there should be free provision of sanitary wear for newly delivered mothers.

Several women write in on their own behalf. One says:

> "15 months ago I had a baby and for six weeks after the baby was born, I bled. Well you can imagine the amount of sanitary protection I used. I don't really know how common it is to bleed for this length of time, but with an extra mouth to feed it would have helped if there had been no VAT on sanitary protection." (Mrs. Joan Parton)

Others look back:

> "Just after my children were born, money was very short, lots of things to buy for baby and pads and tampons at such a ridiculous price!" (16)

Another woman whose husband is unemployed writes:

> "... I could do with about forty tampons each month when on my period, but I just can't afford it, for the simple reason we just don't get enough money to do so. And if I did buy forty, my child would have to do without something she needs, such as cream for her

bottom. And so nearly every month, that goes by I have to use some kind of of cloth, to use as a tampon, because I just can't afford any more than ten tampons. Because the price is just outrageous, and it's impossible for me to buy them." (Mrs. Winnie West)

Bear in mind, reading these extracts, that these woman are writing in protest over taxation. Though they are complaining that their particular bodies are imposing special difficulties on them, they are protesting against a tax which penalises all women. Nothing in these letters suggests that their writers feel resigned, that it is a woman's lot to suffer, although some tell quite distressing stories about their physical condition.

Appendix 1.5 : Poverty

"The cost many times has been far beyond my means." (4)

"I dread the time when my period comes around and I cannot afford to buy a new pack of tampons because they just are too expensive." (17)

"I find it amazingly difficult to keep my spending down to a manageable level at those times of the month when I'm obliged to fork out for those 'luxuries' which my sex almost necessitates." (Lyn Cornish)

"My husband was made redundant just above a year ago... now we are on Social Security and we just about get enough money to buy food and try to put some more by... In other words, we just about survive, and I think the prices of these tampons is just ridiculous... Sanitary towels are not a luxury... I would have a carpet on my bedroom floor because to me that's a luxury not our tampons." (Mrs. Winnie West)

Some women, having had difficulties themselves, express sympathy for others still worse off:

"I realize that it must be more difficult for one-parent families and those with unemployed members, especally if they had daughters too but I know I find them very expensive and so do my friends." (6)

"God alone knows how women with out-of-work husbands, children to feed and clothe AND heavy periods manage to cope. Even without any other problems that really is a curse." (Lyn Cornish)

Other references to women's humiliations due to financial hardship are to be found throughout the letters. Such letters come from many categories of women, though interestingly none say that they are single mothers. Perhaps the condition of direct dependency upon a man combined with lack of money tends to make women feel particularly strongly about this issue?

A young woman of sixteen whose father has married a second time writes:

> "I do not receive any money for sanitary protection at all and find it difficult to talk to my parents about such matters... I go through more tampons than an average person, this is very expensive." (18)

Several women write that the most difficult time for them was just after their first child was born, which, as well as being a time when a woman bleeds for a particularly long time, is the point in her life-cycle when she tends to be most acutely dependent.

A remarkable number of the women who wrote letters had gone to the trouble of calculating what they spend on sanitary wear in a month, a year, or a menstruating lifetime.

The young woman quoted above writes:

> "I have taken it upon myself to work out how much it costs us women. On average I found it to be £9.40 p.a. (buying 10 at a time) and £329.30 for an average menstrual life." (18)

She complains of high prices where she lives ("a rather out of the way place") as does Mrs. W. Witts who reports "the price of tampons in the local chemist are about 90p or more for 20" (March 1982).

Mrs. Jackie Underwood writes that she has to spend £1.41 every month, and Mrs. Susan Fyke says that as she sometimes

needs two packets of 30 she must find "an extra £2 or more suddenly out of the housekeeping". (Jan 1982) Both these women, and others, say that the expense they must suffer is particularly high because they have very heavy bleeding.

More recently, in January 1984, Joyce Broster writes:

> "Last month my period started unexpectedly and I had to rush out to get tampons, slim pads (I need both at first) and a packet of Feminax (without which I wouldn't have been able to go to work). I didn't get much change from a fiver - it was a good job it was Family Allowance day!"

Appendix 1.6 : Hostile Response from Women

Perhaps we can learn something also from the hostile responses Denise Flowers has had from women. These have been amazingly few - she has had only two letters arguing against her campaign, one from an old woman and one from a young one.

Denise recalled the young woman's letter as reading as follows:

> "I was saddened to read yet again of your campaign to remove VAT from sanitary wear or to put it on the NHS. This obsession with trivia makes feminists a laughing stock, and stops them from being taken seriously when campaigning for nursery school provision, removal of

the cohabitation rule, fair pay etc., all of which I feel are issues worthy of support... How many people, who are not incredibly poor, wear National Health specs for any length of time?"

This letter echoes the arguments made by the journalists and politicians. Denise wrote back to her, taking issue with each of her points, and succeeded in persuading her that she had been wrong.

The second letter is more what one might have expected - it is from a 78 year old woman:

"I am very disgusted to read your article.... I think this monthly affair is strictly private and should not be broadcast around. In the 31 years I was married, never once did I tell my husband, that was my own affair. My mother always made the S.T., stitching 2 thicknesses of towelling or old sheeting. These were soaked secretly in the bathroom in a crock slop pail and washed on washdays. I did try to use Tampax and after struggling for half an hour, went back to my old ideas. I must say if young girls use them they cannot be virgins. So if the women who complain about prices, tell them to make some. A friend of mine had to go to Hospital some years ago and the Doctor remarked how nice to see someone using homemade sensible S.T. ... fancy broadcasting to the World... I think its disgusting to discuss this with men, it's a woman's private affair..." (2)

But as I have said, this woman had in fact changed her

views to some extent when Denise wrote again two years later. She writes further:

> "Of course you (she addresses herself to me, not to Denise) are of the new generation and use pads or Tampax. My mother made our pads which were put to soak and surreptitiousal hidden in a bucket, hidden in the old fire copper until washday but I realise students like yourself cannot do this performance... As I was born in 1903 things like periods etc were taboo... if I can help you further with your campaign don't hesitate to write to me. I shall be pleased to answer any query. I have just remembered something that Dr. Charles Hill once said at one of his Friday morning talks (many years ago) on the Radio that women who made such a fuss about the Menopause was just an excuse to avoid dodging unpleasant tasks, how right he was!!.
>
> I nearly forgot to mention that I never knew about monthly until it happened and then my mother told me and in my ignorance I thought it was all the time. I did feel miserable..." (2b)

That menstruation and so forth are private matters to be kept secret from men is an attitude women are supposed, both by our culture generally and by some feminists, eg Matriarchy Study Group, undated) to hold. It seems to me very interesting that so few women have gone to the trouble of trying to stop Denise's campaign, considering what masses of women have written in encouragingly.

Appendix 1.7 : Self-disgust?

It will already have become clear that many of the women who wrote these letters do not like having periods. None express the attitude of celebration which some sections of the women's movement have promoted. But we cannot call these women ambivalent, exactly, for whatever they feel about their own periods, they see no reason why they should be penalised for having them.

> "I know we can't moan about menstruating, that's a normal monthly process, no matter how troublesome, restricting and inconvenient it may be. But to rub salt into the wound, by making us pay through the nose for the 'luxury' of being a woman, is a bit too much to bear!" (Pat Parr)

Some women refer to physical pain - again referring to Michael O'Halloran, one woman writes:

> "Doesn't he realise how lucky he is to be a 'man'. It's enough to have to put up with the discomfort of having a period, let alone do as he suggests..." (Mrs. J. Parton)

However she is not ashamed - she continues:

> "I am of the opinion that people tend to bury their head in the sand (especially men) when it comes to women's problems. Why do people regard periods as 'offensive' and 'not the sort of thing people like to talk about'. Lets face it, every women on earth is or

> has had a period at sometime in their life and I'm sure every man, no matter how sheltered an upbringing he has had, knows that women have to have some form of protection in that area, so why sweep it under the carpet, lets bring it out into the open." (Mrs. J. Parton)

One woman can hardly decide what aspect of menstruation she dislikes most:

> "Can you imagine the financial burden placed on a low paid, one wage earner family with school age daughters. Young women tend to change often as they find the whole business so repugnant. It's bad enough women have to suffer this every month without having to pay VAT for the luxury of a clean, hygienic way of dealing with it." (Mrs. B.E. Nuttall)

Denise Flowers herself is an interesting case on this point, for if anyone should see blood with bad connotations it should be her. Her mother suffers from a rare condition where blood fails to clot and she nearly died of haemorrage during Denise's childhood. Denise says: "Blood for me as a child was quite a fearful thing."

It is clear that women need not be under any illusion about the problems which can be associated with menstruation to be capable of joining in a protest about an injustice relating to it.

Some women certainly do feel disgusted by menstrual blood, like Dawn Perkins quoted earlier, who refers to an "awful gore mixture". Another woman, who could not bring herself to sign her name to her original letter, writes:

> "On meeting many women in hospital and gynaecology clinics I have found that most have found not only their own personal agonies but the cost of what I feel and many others to be an extremely prevailing problem as to protect inside and out against a natural occurrence which has a strong offensive odour to others, many men find at this stage in a woman's life unbearable. So to arrest this offensiveness, we protect at a very high cost... I feel very aggressed and have been waiting for someone to have the guts other than complain to progress to doing something about it, rather cowardly because what I've already said I wish not to enclose my name and address, but I and many, many others support you." (4)

At one level one can see these women as simply reflecting societal attitudes towards menstruation. But I feel it is important not to stereotype 'attitudes towards menstruation', as if they lay along a simple scale from positive to negative. I felt myself flinch slightly, as I read those letters which betray 'A Bad Attitude' - but is this not the same 'bad attitude' that gynaecologists would have it causes dysmenorrhoea? We should also be examining what our implicit assumptions are about what a good attitude would consist of.

For these women clearly do not accept the full male supremacist message that our smelly/polluting bodies make us inferior to men - Dawn Perkins, who writes of the "awful gore mixture" signs herself: "yours sincerely,... Feminist and equal, to insensitive males."

Some letter-writers suggest that other women are prevented from protesting by feelings of shame, but I am inclined to think that what is most striking about this campaign is what a very large number of women there are who are not shamed into silence. What silences continue to exist are there not because women are not willing to speak, but because men have the power to prevent them from being heard.

APPENDIX 2 : THE POLITICS OF THE CAMPAIGN

The one Denise Flowers initiated is far from the only attack there has ever been in this country on the price of sanitary wear. The imposition of tax at 15% adds further injury, and insult, to the fact that these products seem to many women to be overpriced relative to similar items. A very small number of companies dominate the market, operating as a cartel to keep prices high - so obviously so that the Price Commission has criticised them (October 1975).

Many women have been indignant about this situation, and feminist publications carry items protesting about it from time to time (eg Wires No. 2, 1975). Some women have taken to using sea sponges which are put into the vagina to catch the blood as a reusable alternative to manufactured products.

A short-lived feminist campaign existed in Bristol in 1976 which demanded sanitary protection on the National Health. They produced two posters, "Whose bleeding money is it?" and "Demenstruate" (Wires No. 10 1976). They also held a picket outside a chemist in the city. They reported that "Typical comments were: 'at last women's lib is doing something sensiible" (Wires No. 6 1976).

I asked Denise what she thought of the demand for free

provision:

> "... the thing is, I had to be totally logical about it, and no government is going to do that because that would mean they'd have to fork out about 90 million pounds a year () And also you've got to go in , in a way, go in sideways. There was a time when we never thought we'd get free birth control, and it happened. Plenty of people are against it, but it happens... () I had to remember who I was dealing with, and that was men! and politicians won't agree to it. But if you could get this VAT knocked off, say, down to 1%, that would be 1 million,and that would be enough I would think for quite a good supply around the country for women that are vulnerable.

Denise Flowers knows of two other individuals who have tried to organise petitions on this issue, but has gathered that they were both soon discouraged. In 1978, when theVAT rate went up, a woman Labour candidate from East Anglia gathered 5000 signatures on a similar petition.

Evidently in its more radical phases, women in the British Labour movement have also argued for provision of sanitary wear to be part of the welfare provisions which the State should take responsibility for. The report of the Women's Group on Public Welfare (Hygeine Committee, Bondfield 1943), entitled Our Towns - A Close-up, put forward a number of proposals to improve the possibilities for menstrual hygeine for working class women, including that

> "A public utility concern should be set up to manufacture soluble sanitary towels at a low price for widespread sale, including supplies through slot machines which should be suitably installed in schools, maternity and child welfare centres and factories." (p.100)

This fascinating report was brought to my attention by one of Denise Flowers' correspondents.

Also in 1983, the Greater London Council Women's Committee passed a motion calling up the GLC

> "To take a very positive lead and provide free sanitary protection for all women who live and work in London. By taking this lead, it will encourage, by example, the next Labour government to provide this necessary service for women nationally."

However the GLC Women's Committee refused the campaign a grant, even while it was funding many other London-based radical groups and campaigns. Denise commented in a letter to me:

> "Socialists keep telling working class women to speak up, but when we do they ignore us!"

The great success at the national level was that in 1983 the Labour Party's policy statement gave its support to the removal of VAT from sanitary wear. Denise was told that her campaign had been very important in producing this policy change.

That support for the demand is broadly based can be seen from the list of organisations and groups from whom Denise has received letters. What usually seems to happen is that members of an organisation become interested in the campaign and attempt to gain formal organisational support for it. Most frequently, they fail in this, although members of the relevant committee are happy to sign the petition as individuals. Or local groups endorse the policy but cannot get the national organisation to support it. This has happened in the Women's Institute, where local groups repeatedly propose support to national conference and the motions are never discussed. In a similar way a motion was taken to the executive of the Royal College of Nursing, and was turned down at that level.

Denise has had support from within unions: NALGO, TGWU, NUPE; from hospitals and Community Health Councils, Brook birth cotrol clinics, Area Health Authorities; universities and colleges; assorted women's organisations from the Federation of Business and Professional Women to the Women's Gas Federation; and from feminist groups such as local women's health groups.

It seems likely that rather the same process operates within organisations as does within newspapers - the person who initially takes an interest finds she or he is met with strange reactions when she or he speaks to colleagues about the issues. Equally no doubt groups fear some of the

stigma of the cause rubbing off on themslves if they lend their names to it publicly.

Appendix 2.1 : One Woman's Radicalisation

So how does Denise Flowers describe her own politics, and those of the campaign? Her story is of change, change in her attitudes towards men, the media and authority generally.

Although this campaign is far from being Denise's only political activity, it has been her central one over the last few years. She says herself that it has changed her in many ways, and any woman who had experienced the amount of male disapproval she has been through could not fail to have changed her view of the world.

When she began the campaign, she was, I think, acting out of a liberal feminism - that is seeing women as discriminated against, disadvantaged, rather than seeing women as oppressed and exploited. She saw the tax on sanitary wear as discriminatory, as "an insult to women", as the petition says. She discusses her approach with Sue Peters, who has also been involved in the campaign:

> "Sue: Yes well when you think about it, your particular approach to the campaign has been extremely mild - it's when you get letters like this, from this chap (from Women's Health Concern) which make it seem

as if that's exactly what you are doing, sort of sending offensive articles through the post or something.

D: If I'd said some of the things that are on my mind. ..'

Sue: Yes or some of the things that have been written in some of these letters... or that other people have said - I mean it's been an extremely sort of well-mannered campaign in that respect ()

D: I didn't want to set out to shock anyone anyway... in fact that was something that had never crossed my mind anyway, that it might shock people. I never thought about it. I didn't know, I didn't think 'Blimey this is going to get an awful lot of...' Because if I'd thought that it was going to attract a lot of attention to me personally, I wouldn't have done it. I didn't actually think that anybody was going to be so upset..."

For someone with a more radical feminist analysis, seeing men as a social group oppressing women as a group, this tax does not present itself as an anomaly. The state is seen as a male-dominated institution, and individual men as reinforcing male power, by, among other things, supporting beliefs in the inferiority of women's bodies. Therefore writing to one's MP about discriminatory practises would make little sense. It seems to me that Denise has moved nearer and nearer to this position. She spoke with some distress about visiting the House of Commons, when they

delivered the petition:

> "We walked past the bar, and that's where all the male MPs were, you see, knocking it back. And there was a great feeling of despair that they're all in charge... how awful."

Here she explains something of her present views about men's attitudes towards menstruation:

> "Then I started going a bit, further back into it, trying to find out why there was this incredible taboo, and I mean there's an awful lot written about the moon, and mystique, and different countries and cultures, and how it has, menstrual fluid's come to represent this evil. And it's power as well, you can't stop it. Men can stop most things women do, they can stop you having babies because they've invented the pill, they can give you an abortion, they can stop you flooding when you're having menopause by taking your uterus out, but they can't really stop you from having a peroid. And it seems to be... there's an awful lot underneath it, that I thought oh no, that can't possibly come into it, but when you speak to men, they get, really quite squirmy... The best way to approach it is to not really talk about what you're doing, but if they ask, just say 'Have you got a daughter?' and they say 'yes', or they say they've got a wife, you say 'do you think she's unnatural?' And they get really angry, because someone... mind you, it's back to their property is being taxed again,

there are very few men who will support it if they haven't got a wife."

She does not accept the idea that men's attitudes to menstruation spring from fear of blood as such.

"If men bled, they'd have it free! They'd be proud of it... But then, going back to the things that lie underneath, talking about it in groups, the amount of women that say, if you do cut your hand you say 'look at that', but if you bleed, oh god it's so embarrassing, and you sort of shuffle off backwards."

SL: "It's not that it's blood is it?"

"Oh no, it's that it's come from inside, it's come from <u>there</u>! And half of us have never seen our cervixes, inside us anyway, because we're actively encouraged not to, not to examine ourselves anyway. There was this television programme, "Well Being", and they'd said women should examine themselves and the doctors had come on the next week and said 'Ah, putting these unhygeinic things inside yourself!' And one woman said, 'Listen you don't boil a penis for four minutes before it goes in'. And I thought that was really good. This is again, well it's control over your own body..."

When I asked Denise if she felt that the women's movement had not been much help to her, her reply makes it clear that she sees the issue in the context of a broader analysis.

"yes. But then it's down to expecting people to do what you want them to do. You see, whereas it's important to me, there's an awful lot of struggles that are going on, that are very important. I know a lot of women's groups and things don't want to play too much on <u>that</u> side of a woman's body, because it's seen as a negative thing - well what I'm trying to do is to turn it round and say it's a bloody positive thing, and it's the only positive thing you've got.

And really you've got to say not, 'Please can we have. ..' but, 'We deserve better than this', because all the time you're trying to teach your children that they have a right to their own bodies, that nobody has to touch them if they don't want it, and that cones when they go swimming, when they go to the park, specially with girl children and you're constantly saying to them 'You're good, you're solid, you've got this space round you. Keep it, be firm, grow up feeling strong and positive and powerful and equal'. And then you say to them on the other hand, 'But, come the time when you start your periods, it's all going to change, (a) you mustn't mention it and (b) when you do you start paying for it', which I mean, so many women wrote saying we shouldn't even be paying for it. When you're paying for it, it's taxed. Double glazing isn't. But it's going to be taxed. <u>And</u> you mustn't speak about it.

> And there's a great conflict there, because, bringing up daughters, you want them to have a much better deal, you don't want them to go out thinking they've got to step aside all the time for things, not just for other people but for things that come their way, you want them to be positive, and here's a prime example of how they're not. The kids have become quite positive. Paul thinks I'm brainwashing them I think. I do tend to say to them: question that, never accept anything you're told, and also don't believe anything you read in the Press. ()"

Strangely, perhaps, her involvement with this particular campaign has led her to a radical, unapologetic type of feminism. She sees the changes in her as being very much to do with personal attitude.

> "I think somewhere along the line I've lost my sense of humour. No, that's not true actually, I haven't lost my sense of humour, but somewhere along the line I've lost this... ability to speak to people nicely, and ask them, ever so much if they'd mind doing this... I'll just ask now, and if they say no then they say no, and that's it. I'm not going to now change my policies and change my phraseology, if you like, to soften it. Because I think that in a way, everything has been softened, it's all been packaged, the same thing like tampons, it's all been boxed away, and made to look totally unbodylike... if I do keep, like with the Customs and Excise, if I do keep, I've

> just got to say to them, hang on a minute, menstruation equals blood, you're forgetting that there's a certain amount of bleeding involved here. Because they'd never mention it, none of them ever mention it! It's all terribly nicely done."

She says doing women's studies has also had a part in changing her views and feelings.

Denise's politics come out of her own experience. She works from what she knows about being a woman and about being working class (her other major commitment is to local work on tenants' rights). However her concerns are not parochial: she sees the connections between her own and other people's struggles. She has had contact with other groups concerned with Namibia and with Poland, where conditions of crisis have made sanitary wear very difficult to get:

> "You see that's one of the first things to go, and doesn't that take away your strength, wouldn't you feel vulnerable? () Do away with people's footwear and sanitary wear and you've got them..."
> "very interesting how people's power is eroded in very subtle ways..."

She speaks angrily, too, about other feminist issues such as rape and battering. Her women's studies group had asked a policeman to meet them to discuss police attitudes towards rape:

"In the end he did admit that yes it was something that men did to us, 'its not women that do it, you know, it's men. Examine yourselves, look at why you do it. There's a group for everything, alcoholism, drug abuse, people that go bankrupt, but the one main group that should be there isn't. And that's because men just couldn't handle looking at why they rape. Because they don't think it's them that rape, they think that there's this special little category out there, that make obscene phone calls and rape and flash, and that they've got nothing to do with them. But they have, because it's every man's attitude, adds to it, every time he laughs at Benny Hill-type jokes... I've got absolutely to the point now where I just think I don't want the kids to even grow up thinking that a man has the right to poke fun at their bodies. () The whole attitude to a woman's body is one that it can be possessed whenever it bloody well wants to be, by a man. And here they are, marketing all this stuff for us, that we're all buying... we're not questioning the fact that they're making profit, that fact that a male government can turn around and say: this is not important, this is trivial."

Although she is a committed feminist, Denise said she did not feel she "fitted in" to feminist groups very easily - that she couldn't be a "Guardian woman", being working class, and that she couldn't be a "Spare Rib woman" unless

she left her husband. She felt that many married women did not feel that the women's movement would accept them.

Appendix 2.2 : Mass Support

And what of the supporters of the campaign? Who are they? Support for the campaign comes mainly from women who are not in organised feminist groups, not from 'movement' activists. In the letters Denise receives women are far more likely to say they'll get their mother, or their friends, or "our village Ladies Circle" to sign the petition than to mention the members of their consciousness-raising group. On the other hand, the demand is a purely feminist one - that women should not be financially discriminated against on the grounds of their bodies.

Two kinds of explanation for this come to mind. Firstly, feminists are women, after all, and will have many of the same feelings as other women about drawing public atttention to menstruation. Any experience one has of raising 'women's issues', publicly is likely to make one more rather than less aware of men's attitudes towards women. Secondly, as I have suggested, perhaps the tax does not seem anomalous to someone whose world-view is a stongly feminist one in the way in which it does to women who to some extent believe in the formal equality women are supposed to have in this society.

Another point about the energy of this campaign is that anger from the oppressed sex crosscuts with working class anger. Denise herself and many of her supporters have experienced deprivation as a result of their class position, and they are acutely aware of the degradation of not being able to afford the necessities of life.

While I do not believe it is true to say that the WLM is a middle class movement, it has certainly been dominated by middle class women (a fact which working class feminists are at present trying to change). And from my own experience as a middle class woman, though I resent paying high prices for sanitary wear, I have not been in the position of feeling it as a real hardship. I imagine that many of the women active in the WLM are in the same position as myself - and this has led us to put our energies elsewhere, in areas which we find more immediately enraging.

It is difficult to think how to characterise the campaign as a political force. On the one hand in many ways it looks like a very conventional pressure group, making one limited demand of government, using mass petitioning and drawing support from a few backbench MPs. On the other it has features more typical of feminist groups with a more revolutionary orientation - the way in which the campaign is organised is a good example of this. It is rare, also, for a pressure group to find itself so very much at odds with mainstream opinion. The press may ignore issues such

as homelessness as not newsworthy, not amusing - but support for this kind of cause is eminently respectable, not discrediting to those concerned.

The campaign's support reflects this ambiguous position. It has attracted genuine mass support from women to an extent which few feminist groups could boast. Despite this, the central organisers' minds are beginning to turn towards less "acceptable" forms of protest, like sending "things" through the post, as they feel the frustration of speaking nicely to a government which does not appear to listen. Their despair reminded me of the complaints of campaigners for causes which the 'British public' truly has very little interest in - the desperation of people trying to help those subject to political oppression in faraway places, for instance. It would appear that the massive support this campaign has generated has done it no good.

From the perspective of 1985, with an increasingly right wing Conservative government enjoying its second term of office, it is not at all surprising that this campaign has been unsuccessful. The support it gained from the Labour Party can perhaps also be interpreted as part of the process whereby the Labour Party in opposition moves to the left. But would the story have been different five or ten years before?

This campaign exists and has existed in a time of reaction both in terms of the class politics involved, and in terms

of the sexual politics. What remains, to me, remarkable, is the amount of energy it has generated even within such a hostile environment.

The letters, and the history of the campaign generally, form an interesting counterpoint to my interviews with men. We have observed how the etiquette of menstruation works as one mechanism of control over women - the evidence in this appendix demonstrates that women do not necessarily or automatically comply with the etiquette. They are at times less aware than one might expect them to be of men's attitudes towards menstruation.

A woman does not have to consciously want to change her own position as a woman in society to react angrily to insults to women as a group - women as they are. However trying to make a protest and being blocked by men reveals a lot about how male supremacy operates - it is a consciousness-raising experience. The women who wrote these letters do not on the whole know how difficult Denise has found it to get any coverage of the campaign. How much more angry they would be if they knew exactly how little interested men in public life are in their feelings on this subject!

When women are insulted in relation to menstruation, they are being insulted as women in a very direct way, for menstruation is part of us, not something we choose to do. When women protest against such insult, (and I think the

letters show that many women do indeed see taxation of sanitary wear as such an insult), they are equally directly rejecting all the reasons why men feel they can expect to get away with this sort of offense towards women.

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